

Let This Grieving Soul Retire!



Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party

2

Story
Tsukikage

Art
Chyko





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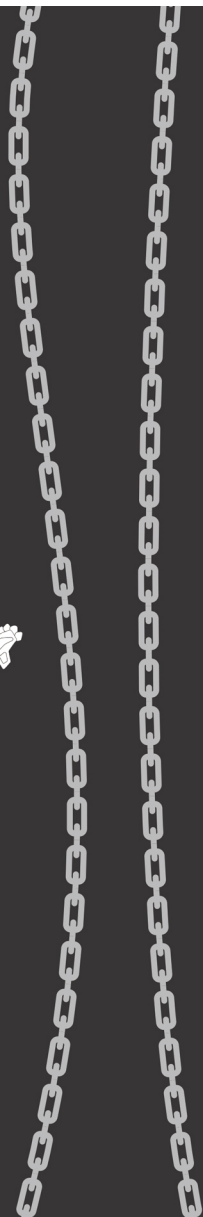
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A large, stylized profile of a human skull in shades of gray, facing right, occupies the left side of the page. The eye socket, nasal cavity, and jaw are clearly defined with bold, dark lines.

Part 2: The Prodigy



Prologue: Lost and Yet to Be Found

The capital city, Zebrudia, bustled constantly with activity. Its wide, well-paved roads crisscrossed the city, hosting a continuous flow of countless pedestrians and carriages. It was so lively that travelers thought festivals were hosted daily at Zebrudia.

With a large population in the capital came more commerce; with more commerce came a more developed capital city. And so, despite its short history, Zebrudia was considered one of the world's most developed cities in existence.

In this vibrant capital city, you could find all sorts of treasures from powerful weapons and pieces of armor, to delicacies found only by the sea, to rare books with only a few copies in existence, to expensive precious cure-all magical potions, and—most notably—to the enigmatic collection of Relics originating from the nearby treasure vaults.

The region around Zebrudia was blessed with an exceptional number of treasure vaults compared to that of neighboring nations thanks to the several major ley lines that ran through the area. This concentration of vaults had established Zebrudia's reputation as *the* holy land for treasure hunting, which had also greatly contributed to the city's advancement.

Treasure hunters doubled as splendid merchants and superhuman warriors, bringing in magical items that weren't replicable with modern technology and vanquishing fearsome monsters and phantoms head-on. While the riches they brought back from vaults fueled the city's expansion, the treasure hunters scared off potential invaders with their prowess at the same time.

All in all, Zebrudia was the epitome of this golden age of treasure hunting. And yet, its growth continued unabated.

We, the Grieving Souls, had moved all the way from our Podunk town to the capital precisely because we'd known the city offered everything we needed to become treasure hunters. Indeed, Zebrudia had exceeded our expectations. While no one could deny my friends' hard work in the past, the robust inventory and connections to excellent mentors found in the city had skyrocketed their prowess. And so, the Grievers—in high gear—had sprinted up the path to what most people considered the glory of treasure hunters.

Fun fact: in the five years since we had settled in the capital, the

Grievers (minus me) had checked off pretty much every vault in the area. Zebrudia still remained our base of operations not only because of the convenience it offered and the friends we'd made in those years but also because of our desire to contribute to the city's growth. And yet, this capital that we owed our success to was now facing a threat, the likes of which it had never seen before.

I was in my room on the top floor of the clan house with my head buried in my hands. The Sitri Slime was nowhere to be found—nowhere. For the past hour, I had scoured the room, but I had found not even a trace of it. I had looked everywhere from my vast collection of Relics to the space under my bed. There was nothing.

It was a nice, warm afternoon. Under normal circumstances, I would have taken a nap in the clan master's chair or have scouted out someone random to be my bodyguard as I strolled through town. Instead, I plopped down on my bed and was parched from all the searching.

"Crap. I can't find it anywhere." I had only realized that the capsule no longer contained the slime right before chucking it at the phantom in White Wolf's Den. Luckily, we had made it out of the vault safely thanks to our cute little walking genocide, but I was left with one important question: where in the world was that Sitri Slime?

In my defense, I had never opened the capsule. It'd been locked away in my safe ever since it was given to me. As far as I was concerned, that thing was one slip of the finger away from causing a catastrophe—I *always* dealt with danger by avoiding it in the first place.

Normally, slimes would be well-known to be the weakest among monsters—they were weak to everything including heat, cold, physical attacks, and even just impact. They were so weak that every kid in the boonies would have stomped on wild slimes for fun at some point. Slimes would, normally, also be famous for the ability to be generated through certain abilities. Along with their high adaptability and capacity to change their nature in reaction to environmental changes, slimes made perfect test subjects for experiments. Of course, there was a limit to a slime's adaptability, and letting a single slime loose would not have been a big deal normally—if it was a *normal* slime, that was.

The Sitri Slime was a creation of the Grievers' Alchemist, Sitri Smart. Sitri had saddled me with a "slightly dangerous" experimental product of hers that could, according to her, reduce the entire capital to ruins. Needless to say, her idea of *slightly* couldn't be trusted.

Sitri was brilliant—enough to make up for her (relatively) feeble physicality. In fact, out of all the Grievers' freaks, she was the one who had grown the most. She had grappled with her own weakness at

the beginning of our journey just like I had done, except she had already been much stronger than I had been at the time. Since the other Grievors had all shown signs of exceptional talents off the bat, I had been the only one who had sympathized with her plight. In hindsight, she had just been a late bloomer; now, she was just as strong as any of my other friends in our party. As she'd gained knowledge, experience, and status, Sitri's abilities had grown dramatically. Regardless, a sense of special camaraderie remained between her and me.

Yet, despite her brilliance, Sitri was lacking in the common-sense department. Because of our bond, she would occasionally gift me fruits of her labor as gestures of pure kindness—I couldn't just turn them down, mostly because she'd just ditch them on a street corner or somewhere and inevitably wreak havoc on the city. What's more, she would often neglect to mention key information about her creations, causing me to unknowingly mishandle them: the Sitri Slime was the latest example.

"No, no, no, no, no. This can't be my fault. I haven't even opened that safe ever since I put the capsule in."

Okay, let me think this through rationally: I had handled the slime with the *utmost* caution, the thing was inside a metallic capsule, and even my dumbass self (who had dropped a Relic sword mid-flight without noticing) couldn't be that unlucky to have dropped *only* the contents of a sealed capsule—that'd be impossible even if I tried!

The capsule had been destroyed, so I couldn't confirm. But there wasn't any scratch on the thing as far as I remembered, let alone any holes. The contents of the capsule being stolen while it was still in the safe was also very unlikely as the safe was in my secure room. What's more, the safe itself was a Relic: I couldn't guarantee that no one could crack the safe, but I would have known if anyone did. Considering all of that, there was only one possible conclusion: the capsule was empty to begin with! It was so obvious!

"Oh, Sitri, what a prankster. Ha ha ha ha..."

Convincing myself to accept that conclusion, I fell back onto my bed. Sitri wasn't an idiot like me, though it also wasn't like her to pull a prank like this. But this was the only possibility I could think of. That's what I told myself, anyway.

Whatever. I didn't want to think about this anymore; I felt like I was going to barf if I did. It was another peaceful day in the capital, and that's all that mattered. I should forget about slimes altogether. Besides, be it Sitri's creation or not, that thing was a slime—the most pathetic monster there ever was. How much damage could a lone slime do to the robust capital, really? Of course, "reducing the entire capital to ruins" was obviously an exaggeration. If anything happened,

the city was packed full of skilled hunters who could deal with the problem.

Clutching my stomach, which was in knots, I continued to compel myself to believe that everything would be fine.

The crimson wolf knights seemed formidable at first glance. Their full armor sets deflected most attacks, and their different weapons meant that hunters would have to strategize differently to counter each phantom. On top of that, their heavy blows were powerful enough to keep even experienced mid-tier hunters on their toes. However, these wolf knights only posed a serious threat to exploring parties that were oblivious to the wolf knights' existence: tough armors could be pierced with powerful weapons, and the different weapons could be countered with preparation as long as the hunters knew beforehand which weapon the phantoms wielded. And even if mid-tier hunters couldn't handle these phantoms, there would always be higher-leveled hunters who could take on the job.

Gathered at the Level 3 White Wolf's Den in the middle of a dense forest were a dozen hunters, varying in dress and equipment. One was dressed from head to toe in armor like a proper knight, and another one like she had come for a nighttime stroll. But these hunters all had one thing in common: they were all top-tier hunters at Level 5 or higher. This was a team of hunters who were well-known even among the sea of hunters and prospective hunters who called Zebrudia their home.

It was commonly accepted that the average level of treasure hunters was Level 3; achieving higher levels required exceptional talent or luck, or both, on the hunter's part—high-level hunters were superhuman in one way or another. For starters, having absorbed mana material from numerous treasure vaults, these hunters were physically much stronger than the mid-tier hunters. For those who regularly traversed treasure vaults ranked much higher than Level 3, these wolf knights weren't a cause for much concern.

"Wasn't this a Level 3 vault?" asked a young man, staring at his sword. He had just killed a wolf knight guarding the den entrance with a slice through its armor and all.

"Yeah, apparently the phantoms here became much stronger over the past week or two. I heard they got Rudolph the Lancer—what a tough boss," said a comrade behind the young man, who was fighting off another wolf knight.

"For real?" he said. "Wait, but I saw Rudolph at the Association today."

"Luckily, the rescue team made it in time."

“Huh. That’s gotta be a first.”

Even as the hunters engaged in small talk, they fought without pause. Now, a bullet of magic was fired through the wolf knight’s skull, and the towering phantom fell to the ground.

These hunters were gathered to assess the status of White Wolf’s Den. While it was rare for the difficulty of a treasure vault to increase out of the blue like this, it wasn’t unheard of. When something unexpected like this happened, the Association would file a reconnaissance quest to have experienced hunters reassess the level of the treasure vault. Since the government also had a vested interest in keeping tabs on all treasure vaults, these quests were often backed by the Zebrudian Empire with a bountiful reward, making these quests easy money for top-tier hunters.

“Good thing he survived,” said a casual voice with a hint of curiosity.

The reconnaissance quest had only been issued by the Association the previous day, which meant that the rescue party couldn’t have known of the current anomalies in the vault ahead of time. The rescue party should certainly have been on guard, knowing that a Level 5 hunter had gone missing. Regardless, that mission could have easily gone sideways.

“Yeah. The Thousand Tricks took that one,” chimed in another emotionless hunter.

“Jeez, a Level 8? Why would he be there?”

“Who knows why he does anything? He has some hidden agenda, that’s for sure.”

“True.”

And so, they stopped thinking about it.

Among the numerous hunters in the capital, only three had reached Level 8. They’d all earned the accolade through receiving special distinctions from the Association for their extraordinary record of treasure vault conquests or other contributions to the treasure-hunting community.

The Thousand Tricks in particular was a hunter who had delved into every aspect of treasure hunting. He was the leader of the highly talented Grieving Souls, the master of a rapidly growing clan, and a hunter of high ranks through his travels to numerous vaults. Yet, on the other hand, most hunters seldom heard so much as a rumor about his activities, nor had they met the Thousand Tricks—who lived in his clan headquarters and rarely showed himself in public—in person; it had been rumored that his appearance was quite unassuming for his level. Even so, the hunters assumed that these rumors didn’t describe the real Thousand Tricks. That is because, for a hunter to raise their level, they had to accumulate recognition points doled out by the

Association and then pass an examination. Although there were plenty of ways to earn points, the examinations were all brutal trials of skill.

“Let’s go in and check up on the higher-level wolf knights *and* the boss, if possible. Let’s earn that paycheck.”

“Roger that.”

At the team leader’s command, all members of the party looked towards the gloomy opening of the treasure vault; they were ready for combat in a wink.

Icy air flowed from the cave, carrying a howl meant to intimidate the new band of intruders.

Chapter One: The Stifled Shadow Returns

The large window of the clan master's office let in plenty of sunlight onto the needlessly impressive desk and chair. Now that winter had come and gone and the air was getting warmer, this was the time of day when I would like to take a nap.

Without any urgent tasks on my plate, I was absentmindedly polishing Relics at my desk when vice clan master Eva Renfied entered. She was wearing her perfectly pressed complete uniform and a pair of red-framed glasses that contrasted her glacial eyes. When we were in the room together like this, we formed a beautiful contrast of an expert secretary and her boneheaded boss; unlike the puppet clan master (yours truly), she seemed to be going through another busy day taking on all aspects of clan management.

"The Association wants to ask you about the details of White Wolf's Den," she said, without even a single word of admonishment—what an incredible vice clan master she was. She used to give me a hard time every now and again when she first started, but she must have lost all hope in me by now.

"Is Ark back yet?" I asked as I yawned loudly while rubbing my eyes. I was so tired, having barely slept from worrying about the missing slime.

"I don't think Ark could handle this given that *he* hasn't been to the den himself. And you're too dependent on him anyway."

I needed...more Arks. He was strong *and* a great person; people respected him too. Surely, I couldn't be blamed for relying on this clanmate of mine, especially when most other top-tier hunters had a few screws loose in their heads. From experience, I had learned that most problems could be solved by passing the buck to Ark—if only I could have him be the clan master instead of me... Well, even though this reliance had led to that traumatizing experience in White Wolf's Den, that was all on me. Ark hadn't done anything wrong; he never did. Incidentally, I was confident that he could do something about the missing-slime conundrum of mine.

"Tino's the leader," I said. "Go tell her. I just caught up to them afterwards."

I had gone to rescue them, but it wasn't like I had taken out any phantoms or had helped save Tino's party in any way. Although,

technically, since Liz had tailed me into the den, *I* was the root cause of Liz saving the party. But looking back on it, I was spectacularly pathetic.

Back in the day, I had dreamed of becoming the kind of hunter who could swoop into mortal peril and save whoever was in distress.

I dared not kid myself like that anymore. All that mattered was that Tino and her party returned to the capital safe and sound.

I sighed somewhat sagely. “Never mind. Anyway, has *anything* happened in the capital?”

“Anything? What do you mean *specifically*?”

Eva was extremely capable. She had taken my vague and directionless concepts of clan management and made them into a reality. Unlike me, *she* had the skills necessary to keep First Steps running, even now that it had ballooned out of control. In fact, every member of the clan (except me) was very talented.

One such skill of Eva’s was her ears around the capital: if anything was off in the city, she’d know about it. There wasn’t anything that resembled alarm in her voice when I asked the question; ergo, I didn’t let the Sitri Slime loose onto the city. QED.

I settled myself back into my chair, letting out a sigh of relief. Everything was all right, I hoped. “It’s fine. If nothing’s going on.”

“I’ll look into it straightaway,” said Eva.

“No, it’s all right; there’s no need for that; it’s totally fine; there’s probably nothing... Let’s just take it easy.”

Eva stared at me dubiously. Perhaps her only flaw was that she took her job too seriously. There was no need to go poke the beehive; time would solve most problems in this world.

But I really needed Sitri to come back before it was too late.

“*And*, Tino is tied up in her training with Liz,” said Eva.

“Huh, that’s very studious of her.”

Not everyone could jump right back into training after a life-and-death quest like the one she’d just been through. To think how far Tino had grown since her days as a mere normal girl was quite touching; now, she was steadily growing to become a superb hunter. And it also seemed that Liz was actually being a good mentor... That gave me an idea.

Yet, a rush of sleepiness made me yawn—I’d fall asleep if I stayed in my chair. Of course, the clan would function just fine while I snoozed away, but it wouldn’t be good for Eva’s morale if I napped the day away while she worked nonstop. Not that I cared if I got voted out of my position, but the clan couldn’t afford to have Eva quit.

“Maybe I should stop by and say hi. Training grounds?” I asked.

“That’d be a great idea. They are in the B2 training grounds.”

“Okey dokey. Take care of things around here, will you?” I waved

at Eva, who maintained a stoic expression throughout, and walked out of the office.

“I need information—now,” said Eva with an emotionless, frigid voice. “Go find out any and all irregularities occurring in the capital, no matter how insignificant they may seem.”

“U-Understood!” replied a staff of Eva’s as they hurried out of the room.

Eva Renfied was a former merchant. Before starting her career as the vice clan master, she had been a member of Welz Trading, one of the largest trading companies in the competitive market of Zebrudia. Although Eva hadn’t held a high position at Welz at the time Krai headhunted her, she had been maintaining her connections with the company even after she switched careers. Since her early days on the job, Eva had been using her position to construct an intricate information network throughout the city the best she could to contribute to the clan’s success.

First Steps was an enormous clan, and a roster of talented hunters was akin to a formidable army. Therefore, a clan of Steps’s caliber always drew the attention of the government, merchants, other hunters, and even thieves. Eva, with all the connections she had built, had been gathering all the information she could from her merchant network, the papers, the word of mouth of treasure hunters, and even her contacts within the Association.

Information had to be fresh, and Eva knew the importance of freshness. Her subordinates had been keeping her up-to-date with the newest occurrences in the capital constantly. That’s why when the clan master asked her that question, it came as a great shock to Eva. As far as she knew, there had been nothing highly unusual in the capital recently except for the powerful phantoms emerging in White Wolf’s Den. But Krai had already experienced that firsthand and should know better than she did.

Eva took pride in her information network; if she hadn’t worked with Krai for as long as she had, she wouldn’t have given much thought to his question—certainly not enough to have sent an employee out to investigate.

Eva found her boss quite mysterious. When they had first met, Krai was a boy without a moniker nor the coveted Level 8. A few years had passed since then, but she still struggled to get a grasp on that man who was always bored in his office polishing his Relics. He never gave directions when it came to running the clan, nor did Eva ever see him partaking in any traditional treasure-hunting activities. He didn’t look strong at all, and except for the occasional bizarre

choices he made, his character was also nothing noteworthy. Neither did he have the fire in him that was in the few hunters in the clan who would become heroes one day; at least Eva hadn't seen it in him. In fact, Krai always kept going on about the nonsense of retiring from hunting and being the clan master. If anyone watched his day at work without knowing who he was, they would have called him a slacker; even Eva was once disgruntled with his brazen ineptitude when she first started her job. But now, she knew that Krai was more than what he seemed to be.

Eva put faith in Krai's every word. His seemingly random comments always ended up to be ridiculously accurate predictions. His predictions surprised even Eva, who knew the capital like the back of her hand. On numerous occasions, she had witnessed Krai premonishing occurrences that came without any warning otherwise: abnormalities in distant treasure vaults, dramas among empire nobles, shadowy deeds of crime syndicates, and even natural disasters like earthquakes. Krai was in no position to have been privy to all this information, but, still, he predicted things that evaded even the world's most expansive information networks.

He always explained it away as coincidence or dumb luck, but Eva had a feeling even Krai didn't expect her to believe those excuses. Once could have been a coincidence, but with all the "coincidences," Eva had no choice but to believe that her boss had a cryptic ability of foresight above mere talent.

Thousand Tricks, a befitting moniker indeed; when she first heard the moniker, Eva thought there could be no better moniker for the clan master. Krai was the reason that talented hunters had flocked into Steps. Multitudes of self-centered, prideful hunters all fell into line under this unassuming youth. At times, Krai seemed like even more of a freak than all the other obviously superhuman hunters combined.

Eva took pride in her abilities, but she also knew that she was a mere mortal. If Krai had sensed a sign, Eva would take his word for it no matter how out of the blue it seemed.

Having commanded her legion of staff in the vice clan master's office, a room much more cluttered than her boss's, Eva watched the streets through her window. She chased the nagging thoughts of her scheduled task out of her mind and attempted to identify anything she might have missed about the state of the city.

"What's going on in the capital right now?"

This was Eva's routine whenever Krai blurted out such a premonition.

Traversing a treasure vault was an ordeal: never-ending traps, unforgiving environments, and battles against monsters and phantoms were always matters of life and death no matter how much precaution hunters took. This was why good hunters never stopped improving.

There were plenty of facilities in the capital built for hunters to hone their crafts in, and one of the most thought-out features of the First Steps clan house had to be the training grounds. I doubted that many other clans in the capital, even those at least the size of Steps, had built-in training grounds in their clan house. Steps's widely popular training grounds, reaching five stories underground, were always available to all clan members.

Hunters who could take on high-level treasure vaults were ridiculously powerful—and destructive. I was told that building the training grounds to withstand the force of their training cost a pretty penny. Not that I knew too much about the construction process; I had only thrown in two cents on the project. But apparently, Eva and her staff went through *a lot* of trouble to make sure that it was properly built.

On my way down the steel stairs to the training grounds, I passed a familiar party of five. One of them, a burly, brown-haired man with a scar splitting his cheek, spotted me and stared at me wide-eyed. He carried with him a halberd that looked like it could split a full armor set in half. I did recognize him... His name was on the tip of my tongue.

“Master Krai, funny seeing you down here. Up for some training?”

As clan master, I absolutely did *not* know every name and face in the clan. But since every member had to go through an interview with me before joining, I was supposed to have met all of them at least once. Yet, there was nothing but crickets in my brain at this moment. I still hadn't gotten used to people knowing my name without me knowing theirs. They didn't know I was blanking on their names, right?

I wore a gentle smile to cover up that fact. “Yeah, something like that. You guys've been training?”

The party shared a look. That wasn't good. That was a telltale sign of bad news incoming.

I felt a powerful urge to cower.

A tall guy frowned and spoke for the group. “Yes, but... It may be best *not* to go down there at the moment. It's a bit...turbulent.”

“That wasn't training... That was torture,” said the distraught-looking man behind him.

Okay. Maybe I wasn't going down to the training grounds.

I already had a good guess as to what they were talking about: Liz. She was bloodthirsty and didn't understand the word

“moderation.” Sadly, she had this built-in feature where you could always find her at the end of a trail of knocked-out humans or dead monsters, or at the dead center of the nearest commotion, really. Liz’s training, which made Tino’s improvements possible, apparently was harsh even in the eyes of experienced hunters. But don’t get me wrong: Tino was a good hunter; not many hunters had what it took to reach Level 4 so rapidly. I was sure it wasn’t as bad as literal torture. Although, Liz could be in an overexcited state having just returned from a hunt.

“Don’t worry. Liz is usually turbulent,” I reassured.

“Right... The Stifled Shadow is one of your party’s members.” The five hunters looked at me awkwardly.

I was sorry that one of mine was always causing trouble.

“We hear she’s attacking anyone who tries to stop her,” said one of the hunters. “You might want to wait until the dust settles.”

I was *really* sorry that one of mine was always causing trouble.

I wondered how wild it was in there. Why were these five hunters, who fought monsters on a daily basis, looking so exhausted? Why couldn’t Liz just take it easy after what had happened in White Wolf’s Den? It was her prerogative to train Tino however she saw fit, but I very much preferred if she could stop negatively affecting the rest of the clan in the process.

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out,” I said.

“If you say so, we won’t stop you.”

They were *terrified* of her. Sigh, so much for our clan rule “everyone must get along.”

Liz had *always* been nippy, and just about the furthest person from moderation. But now that she had superhuman powers, she was like a little monster.

I continued down the stairs so I could stop her violence, followed by the (for all I knew) nameless party for some reason. There were several clan members just hanging out at the entrance to the B2 training grounds. Huh, how bizarre.

A man of dark-green hair turned towards me. He and I were about the same height, but it was easy to tell from his build that he was an established hunter. A few years older than me, he was, but still in the range of what people would consider young hunters. He was Sven Anger, one of the OGs in the clan, a clan member I’d known for years, and an excellent archer. Sven was the leader of the Level 6 party Obsidian Cross, one of the better parties in the clan. He was like *the* trusty older brother among clanmates.

As soon as he saw me, Sven called out in excitement, “Krai! About time you came to pick her up. You gotta pull the reins on the Stifled Shadow in there—we can’t even use the training grounds!”

“Dealing with superhuman barbarians isn’t my forte,” I said. In fact, Sven and his Obsidian Cross crew specialized in taking out monsters and beasts over vault-diving. I was doubtful that my figurehead self would fare any better than they did.

“That’s *your* barbarian! She’s gotten stronger again!” barked Sven. *That* was a bit harsh; they were clanmates after all.

So, she’d gotten stronger again, had she? I let out a short sigh and said defeatedly, “Okay.”

Unfortunately, my friends had long outgrown the confines of my comprehension; I had lost track of how freakish their abilities had become. Catching bullets blindfolded wasn’t good enough for them, apparently.

Sven glowered at the thick doors to the training grounds and said, “No Ansem, no Lucia—there’s no one here who *can* stop her! Why has Liz come back on her own?!”

Sven probably could have put up a good fight against Liz. But then, she’d keep on biting until one of them went down.

There were two factions in Grieving Souls generally: the troublemakers and the (relatively) levelheaded members. There was a recurring formula in our party where Liz or Luke would start a fire which Ansem or Lucia would then have to put out. Without a tamer, Liz could be far more dangerous than a literal monster.

I was so, so sorry one of mine was always causing trouble.

“She deactivated all the traps and made it to the boss room without a scratch, *then* decided to just drop the whole thing and run home,” I explained.

“She was at Night Palace, wasn’t she?” asked Sven in disbelief. I couldn’t believe it either.

Liz really was a free spirit. Leaving your party behind in a vault was one of the unforgivable sins of the hunter world, but our party had a unique way of working. Other than one member whom we’d added to the party later as a sort of experiment, all of us were old friends and free spirits—it just worked. Well, it wasn’t like they were without a healer, and they still had another Thief with them. They’d be fine.

“If you don’t stop her soon, Tino’s dead.” Sven urged me.

“Aha! You’re blowing it out of proportion. People don’t die that easily.”

“No...she’s seriously...”

Sure, Liz was prone to be genocidal sometimes; and couldn’t help but bark at everyone; and had been arrested numerous times for fighting; and even had a bounty on her head in the underground; she had plenty of flaws, but she wasn’t the kind of person who could kill her own apprentice.

Sven and his party took a step back. I smiled amusedly, slowly opening the door to the training grounds.

Liz, imperiously, stood in the center of the training grounds. Her bright-pink hair tied in a ponytail and her revealing outfit showing much of her tanned skin were typical of Thieves. Without the nearly knee-high metallic boot Relic, Apex Roots, she would've looked like a normal girl. To be honest, her berating what looked like a large dirty rag by her feet was neither normal nor girly.

"Why won't you get up? *Why*? Have you hit your limit already? That *can't* be right! Are you slacking? Are you *mocking* me? You wanna die? Wanna die, T? You think you won't die? You think I won't kill you? I will! Don't you have *anything* that matters to you? Anything that you wanna protect? Your arms and legs are still attached. *Why* won't you move them? If that's what it takes for you to actually *try*, you can *die*, now!"

"All right, that's enough!" I cheerfully called as I clapped my hands. I was sickened on the inside, of course—did it really have to be "kill or be killed" for her, every day of the year?

I ran over to the clump on the ground (aka Tino) to see it squeaking out cries of half pain and half sorrow. Tino had curled herself up as small as she could. She was quivering.

Tino's pool of hair on the ground shifted slightly as she motioned to lift her head. And, before her eyes, Liz stomped hard on the ground. A thundering boom shook the entire building. Tino twitched. The floor that had been built to withstand the rigorous training of hunters now had an indentation in the shape of Liz's boot. How she had packed that much strength in her tiny frame, I'd never know.

"What is it, Krai Baby?" asked Liz in a casual tone. "You see, I'm teaching T a lesson right now." Her rose quartz-colored eyes pierced me with their sight.

She had a ridiculously low boiling point, but she took strength seriously. She had honed her skills through a myriad of tribulations, at times crawling back from the brink of death. She set very high bars for Tino, but she was also coaching her apprentice sincerely. What's more, she hated it when her coaching was interrupted.

Our clan had been running for a few years at this point, which meant the older parties had known Liz for a long time. Her disdain for interruptions had become so well-known that no one dared step in.

"T's talented," continued Liz. "Maybe even more so than me. But she's so *weak*. Why is that? I was a lot stronger when I was her age."

Tino was plenty strong (everyone was when compared to me). Wasn't that enough? We ought to celebrate our differences.

"Uh-huh." I managed to keep my smile glued on as I stood between Liz and Tino. Sven's party stood silently at the door,

watching with bated breath as a horrible tension filled the training grounds.



Even though I couldn't fathom the disparity between Liz and Tino, I took Liz's word for it. There must be undeniable truth in that statement for Liz to admit Tino as *maybe* more talented than herself. Regardless, that didn't give her the right to break our mascot Tino's spirit.

Liz wore a spine-chilling smile and spoke as if with a tangible threat of violence in her voice, "This isn't enough. At this rate, T could be a deadweight to you again, Krai Baby. You're so nice and might have forgiven her for that, but I need my apprentice to be stronger than this at the minimum. If T's a little wimp, people will think *I'm* also a wimp."

Apparently, it was all because of how things went back in White Wolf's Den. True, Tino couldn't complete the mission on her own and suffered an injury at the hands of a surprisingly powerful phantom; we also would've been wiped out in that vault if Liz hadn't shown up. But all that was on me for sending Tino's party. I'd explained everything to Liz right after we'd returned from the vault, but, apparently, my rationale went in one of her ears and out the other.

Tino was the furthest thing from a wimp—no one would think so. Level 4 was a respectable rank for a hunter, and Tino had certainly earned it. Her looks might draw some debate, but she'd dealt with that so far.

Liz turned to the door, her eyes burning with contempt. "You *busybodies* tried to stop me, but it's none of your business. Unlike you dunces, T *needs* to get stronger. And you can't get stronger if you're not willing to die trying to. There's no time to rest; there's no time to mess around. Are you trying to make my apprentice a bag of garbage? I'll slit all your throats first."

It wasn't an empty threat—I believed in her willingness to act on murderous rage. As twisted as that was, it showed her passion for training her apprentice.

Tino was still a ball on the ground, shaking.

Liz, looking up at me, peered into my eyes. "You understand, don't you, Krai Baby?" The sweetness in her voice felt like a dagger against my throat.

With a frozen smile, I answered, "Uh-huh. I appreciate your enthusiasm. But Tino's reached her limit, so let's call it a day."

I didn't know how many hours they had been at it, but Tino was *on the floor*. Without Ansem here to heal her, too much torture could leave long-term damage. I wasn't enthusiastic about potentially triggering Liz, but there was no one else who could stop her.

Liz blinked a few times like she couldn't comprehend me before crooking her neck and asking, "Oh? Krai Baby? Are you *stopping* me?"

“Uh-huh, sure am.”

Her eyes opened wide. Behind those pink irises whirled powerful energy that could blow at any moment. For a few seconds, Liz looked into my eye with a gaze so strong that I felt her staring into my soul.

The air felt heavy with tension.

Slowly, Liz reached out and touched my cheek. Then she beamed. “Then let’s call it a day!” she declared in a cheerfulness that completely contrasted with the frigidness she had shown moments earlier.

She turned to Tino and said, “Sorry, T. I held back to keep myself from killing you. You were still twitching, so I thought you could keep going. But if Krai Baby says so, you must be at your limit, right?”

“Master...?” whimpered Tino.

Why was she calling me instead of Liz?

Tino slowly raised her head. On her face was the smiling skull mask—the emblem of Grieving Souls. There were no openings for eyes on the mask; there were no tears running down the forever-smiling mask.

Why was she wearing the mask?

As if reading my mind, Liz cheerfully explained, “I wanted to see if T would suck a little less if she joined us; I wanted to see if T would improve; I wanted to see if T was ready. But no. She couldn’t do *anything* with just the mask blinding her—there’s no room in our party for anyone like that, is there?”

Despite Liz’s conviction, Grieving Souls had no such requirement. If there had been, *I* wouldn’t be in the party. In fact, the only one requirement for joining was a recommendation from an existing member.

That being said, I felt it was still too early to let Tino in. It’s not like Tino couldn’t pull her weight, but, as much as I wanted to recruit new members, the treasure vaults my friends were taking on now were far too dangerous for Tino. I didn’t want anyone dragging Tino into a high-level vault to “train” and end up killing her. The other Grievors could probably keep her safe, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

“Uh-huh. I don’t think it’s time just yet,” I said.

“When do you think she’ll be ready, Krai Baby?”

Don’t ask me. I was practically a figurehead who didn’t really know the current state of the party anymore. Pretending to contemplate but not actually putting much thought into the question, I just said while maintaining my smile, “When she’s on your level.”

“What?!” squeaked Tino from the ground, her voice full of despair.

She didn’t have to sound like a dying puppy—I was only kidding!

Liz was her mentor after all. I was sure she'd recommend Tino to the party when the time was right. What weight did my word hold anyway?

For whatever reason, Liz clung to my arm and squealed in delight, "You're such a meanie, Krai! She'll never join the party this way."

"Now, now, that's not true," I said. I was looking forward to Tino joining our party as much as anyone. After witnessing her performance in White Wolf's Den, I was sure it wouldn't be long until she joined. But I didn't mention this, of course, because it all came down to Liz's decision.

"So," said Liz, "what are you doing here, Krai Baby? You couldn't stay without me?"

"Gark wants to ask Tino about the Den."

"Look at you. Doing the footwork, Krai Baby? You could've just sent somebody." Then Liz spat, "Why didn't anyone volunteer?"

I patted her head and combed through her silky hair to distract her from that train of thought. She gave me a smile.

It's fine. I wanted to go. Actually, it was me whom he'd asked for.

"Is it urgent?" she asked with a finger touching her lips, looking down towards the motionless Tino. "If it is, I'll throw her into Gark's office right now."

This was how Liz had always treated Tino. I'd never understand why Tino, as much as she feared Liz, still looked up to her.

"It's not urgent," I said. Gark wasn't that strict to expect Tino to show up in this state. "It can wait until she's recovered. Like tomorrow, or the day after that..." *Or we could just not go at all.* What a brilliant idea—I'd just say I had forgotten about it!

"Did you hear that, T? I know you did. Do you understand? If you hear me, *nod.*"

At the sound of Liz's voice, Tino's head moved up and down almost imperceptibly.

Tino was in a state worse than when she was in the den. Feeling just so bad for her, I watched Tino and sighed. Sure, Tino was a hunter and Liz's apprentice, but she was also a member of my clan and a friend of mine.

I have to get Liz away for now. Tino needs some time. I wasn't engaged in active treasure hunting to say the least, but this was part of my job description as party leader, I was sure.

Going around behind Liz, I grabbed her by the shoulders—shoulders too frail to belong to a girl who butchered every phantom in her path—and started pushing.

"Okay, Lizzie, let's go somewhere else now," I said.

"Krai Baby, are you babying me?"

"No. Of course not. What a good girl you are." That ought to quell

her, right?

My clanmates, who had been watching with bated breath by the door, looked distressed by this turn of events. Liz, on the other hand, didn't seem to mind the attention. These taming skills of mine were years in the making; I knew Liz was self-centered by nature, and taking an apprentice hadn't changed that.

"So, where's 'somewhere else'?" she asked. "Like a date?"

"Uh," I said, "to get ice cream?" I proposed even though I knew Liz couldn't stand sweet things—neither could Sitri nor Lucia nor Ansem. I was the only Griever who had a sweet tooth. I'd usually ask Tino to tag along since she was the only one around who shared my taste. Sure enough, the suggestion dampened Liz's cheer.

Just as Liz opened her mouth to speak, below her, a bloody and calloused hand caught her attention as it clasped around one of her boots.

A dangerous gleam flickered in Liz's eyes.

"Hmm? What are you doing, T? I'm having a conversation with Krai Baby *right now*."

Tino, still on the ground, didn't move a muscle; her feeble grip could've been shaken off by a mere step. And yet she panted, "I...can still...go, Master!"

I couldn't see her face under the suffocating mask that supplanted every emotion of its wearer with a twisted grin. To be frank, I regretted my choice of a party emblem.

Liz gently removed my hands from her shoulders and turned towards Tino. Oh dear, I was afraid this wasn't looking good for Tino.

"Wow!" cheered Liz, strangely ecstatic. "You couldn't move at all until a second ago. I thought I made sure your bones were fractured—there's no way you recovered this quickly! Look, Krai, my little T is finally getting stronger!" She was on cloud nine despite having been interrupted.

I dared not question why. I could only stand there aghast as Liz doted on Tino.

Tino looked shattered on the floor like she needed immediate healing. But then, amazingly, Tino feebly rose to her knees, and—just barely—to her feet. She was so dazed that I felt like even I could have taken her down in a fight. At that moment, I was truly grateful that she had the mask on to hide her expression.

"You did it again, Krai Baby!" squealed Liz. "I always felt like I couldn't give her that one last push. I'm so jealous of you, Krai Baby! That's it, T. You can do so much better! *This* is what you were missing!"

I stood there wondering what exactly she was talking about. Again, I dared not ask. Liz was in overdrive: she was burning in a fiery

energy so intense that it was almost tangible.

Her moniker, Stifled Shadow, had once belonged to the most famous Thief in Zebrudia. Liz had sought out his tutelage and inherited the moniker in a matter of just a few years. Rumor had it that the life of a Stifled Shadow stretched beyond that of us mortals. And when a Stifled Shadow used their full power, their heart shuddered, and their body burned with intense heat.

Liz laughed as she casually stretched her limbs. “I’m really sorry, Krai Baby. Do you mind sitting out for a bit?”

“Really?” I muttered. *She’s going to resume Tino’s training?!* Tino, at the brink of collapse, had no chance in any world against a full-powered Liz. The look in Liz’s eye told me that she had no intention of holding back either.

“I don’t mind if you stay,” said Liz, “but wouldn’t that be a bit cruel for T? You can’t see her face, but she wouldn’t want you to see what’s about to happen to her: coughing up blood and peeing herself. I can’t get *too close* to killing her since we don’t have a healer here, but the embarrassment of being seen by you in that state would kill me instead if I were her. You understand, don’t you? You can watch next time, Krai Baby, but this is the first time she’ll be going this far. Have some mercy on her, won’t you?”

Damn. Liz had the same energy whether she was livid or ecstatic.

“Yes, ma’am.” I could only nod in the face of Liz’s smile, which beamed like a sunflower. I did manage to steal a glance at Tino, who seemed willing to continue her training. I would never understand what drove them to this extreme—hunters really were an enigma.

I walked up the stairs as I apologized to Sven’s party. “Sorry about that. There’s no getting through to Liz once she gets like that.”

Liz never had a moral quandary for starting fights with others. Although, at least she listened to her childhood friends. But by “listened,” I really do mean that she only listened and took our words under advisement; nothing more. There was no ordering her around under any circumstances.

Each basement floor of the clan house hosted training grounds with varying equipment. The one Liz was occupying now was the one designed for Thieves. It had everything from hand-to-hand combat training tools, to dagger-throwing targets, to booby traps, and to treasure chests. The problem was that this was the only training ground that was equipped with those facilities. These training grounds weren’t small enough for a pair of hunters to completely take over, but *this* was an exception. I’d exhausted every measure to get Liz out of there, so Sven’s party would have to settle for one of the other training grounds or put off training altogether until tomorrow.

“It is what it is. This isn’t the first time you’ve pushed one of us to

the limit anyway,” said Sven, grunting at my apology.

“No, I was trying to stop—”

“No need to explain,” interrupted Sven. “I know, I know. Making Tino stronger would be beneficial to us all.” He nodded to himself, clearly not understanding. He then shared a look with his party mates, and they all seemed to be in agreement. If only Liz and I could get on the same page as easily as they did!

Oh, well. I’d let it go if they were willing to overlook Liz’s atrocity.

Strong hunters were mostly nuts in one way or another. Sven and his party were pretty outlandish in comparison to nonhunters, but they seemed wonderfully levelheaded when next to Liz. Help.

Anguished cries echoed in the training grounds behind me, but I decided to turn a deaf ear. I just wanted to drop everything and go get ice cream.

“The northern road’s blocked off?” I asked, surprised by the tip Sven gave me during our small talk.

The capital was pretty much in the geological center of the empire. It had big, wide roads stretching to the north, east, south, and west, connecting it to other major cities and treasure vaults. That’s why even just one of them being blocked off was a huge deal. While I had heard about a stray phantom from White Wolf’s Den attacking a caravan, I doubted that warranted a block-off.

“Yeah, they spotted several phantoms. They’re still looking into the details, but a couple knights from the Order have been taken out already,” explained Sven sternly.

By and large, phantoms remained within treasure vaults. Spotting one outside was very rare, and doing so more than once in a short period of time was no coincidence.

Now that I think about it, White Wolf’s Den was somewhat off too, I recalled how the dungeon was when I went to rescue Tino.

I had no clue as to the cause of all the irregularities, nor did I have any stakes in the block-off as I stayed within the boundaries of the safe, secure capital city. That being said, these roads acted as the arteries of the empire. Merchants only gathered in Zebrudia under the assumption that the roads were safe to travel on. And so, it was entirely possible that we, hunters, would be requested to help resolve the issue. I wondered if Gark had summoned me to discuss this matter; Gark had a habit of asking for my input in times like this just because I was high-level.

After pondering on this for a few moments, I gave up. *Sigh.* There was no point thinking about it. At least I had an ace up my sleeve—of course not Liz, who ditched her friends in a treasure vault and

returned alone to the capital—these kinds of problems called for Ark Rodin.

People looked up to Ark. He was strong, smart, and well-known, not to mention a stellar leader. And most importantly, he was a good guy. His party members, while not quite on par with Ark, were also perfectly capable. Being a great commander and warrior, Ark was like having a whole team of hunters in the body of one. In fact, there were none who wouldn't listen to Ark among the prideful hunters that made up Steps (excluding my childhood friends). Things just worked out if I put Ark in charge and let him handle it. And if they didn't, it would mean that there was nothing I could have done anyway.

When is Ark coming home? I'd have to buy time at all costs until he was back. Ark always notified me before leaving the capital for an extended period, so he should be returning before long. Hence, I just stood there without thinking too much about the block-off.

Sven twisted his intimidating expression into a grin as he clapped my shoulder. "You're chill as always, CM."

I returned just a silent smile. There was little mystery as to why I was so chill: this had nothing to do with me. Not to brag or anything, but my self-preservation skills were remarkable. By "self-preservation skills," I meant "saddling-other-people-with-my-job skills." That was how I'd always done things, and would continue to do. I could only hope that someone would kick me out of my position before I irredeemably messed things up.

"Who knows what's going on out there? We were going to make sure we'll be in tip-top shape in case we get called into action," added Sven, "but we can always do that tomorrow, I guess."

Once again, I was really sorry that one of mine was always causing trouble.

Luckily for me, Sven didn't sound annoyed at the change in his plans. Also, his party and mine went way back; Sven'd been dealing with Liz's madness since before we even moved to the capital.

Obsidian Cross was a party famous for its members complementing each other to produce reliable performance. Its members would have no problem if they went right this second and handled a few stray phantoms, especially if they were just like the wolf knights in White Wolf's Den.

A brilliant idea popped up in my mind: if I sent Obsidian Cross to Gark, wouldn't its members be saddled with everything? Gark shouldn't have anything to complain about with a Level 6 party. This was a perfect match. Unlike me, Sven didn't mind hunting phantoms. What a genius idea!

I clutched my hands together and gave the members of Obsidian Cross a once-over. And with a smile, I said, "If you guys have some

extra time, why don't you go pick up a quest? And by the way, while you're at the Association, can you let Gark know that I'm a bit too busy to go see him today?"

Krai Andrey happily sauntered away as Sven watched him go.

Henrik Hefner, the Cleric of Obsidian Cross, finally spoke up. "I never know what he's thinking. He seems," Henrik paused to give it a thought, "so carefree."

Sven chuckled, scratching his cheek. "Yeah. He's not a bad guy though."

Obsidian Cross was one of the OG member parties of First Steps. While its members were a few years older than those of Ark Brave or Grieving Souls on average, it was one of the younger contributing parties of this golden age of treasure hunting. With a unique composition where every member possessed healing abilities, this well-balanced party had completed numerous quests thanks to its members' wary decision-making strategy. But that also meant that they didn't earn as many flashy accolades as other hunters of similar level would've. Obsidian Cross suffered from having to share the spotlight with two other insanely successful parties, but it would've been regarded as the *best* party of the generation had the members been around a decade or two earlier. Naturally, it was highly regarded by the Association and other parties.

"Maybe you should have said no, Sven. What is he doing all the time anyway?" asked Henrik carefully, trying to conceal his exasperation and dissatisfaction.

Since a clan was a form of cooperative comprised of multiple parties, there were no ranks within a clan: no party was under any obligation to do favors for another hunter—not even the clan master. Having to run errands didn't sit right with Henrik, especially since pride and reputation were very important to hunters.

Every treasure hunter in the capital knew Grieving Souls's history: in a word, its path had been tumultuous. The Grievers took on high-level vaults like there was no tomorrow, risking their lives to sprint up the path to glory. They were the polar opposite of Obsidian Cross's members, who made sure to take on only one treasure vault at a time, safely.

While a careful hunter like Henrik couldn't understand how the Grievers did it, he respected them for it. All hunters carried some reverence for Grieving Souls—the leader of the party, however, was a different story. Henrik had never once seen the Thousand Tricks venture into a treasure vault. When he had first joined Obsidian Cross half a year ago, Henrik had revered the notorious Thousand Tricks—

the reverence had faded completely over the past six months as he witnessed Krai behind the scenes.

“It’s all right,” said Sven to quell Henrik’s blatant disgruntlement. “We have the time. It’s not a bad idea to have him owe us a favor anyway.”

Henrik frowned. Their leader, Sven, usually stood his ground. “Their party leader stays back while the rest of the team go into a vault—aren’t they mad about it?”

“Krai’s always been this way. You may be too new to know it, Henrik, but his party just works that way, and so does this clan.” Sven’s tone was lighthearted but packed with enough severity to warn Henrik not to question Krai any further.

“If you say so, Sven,” said Henrik. Unhappy as he was, he admitted it wasn’t wise to criticize his own clan master so openly.

Henrik had decent experience as a hunter. He had worked with several other parties before joining Obsidian Cross, and he considered himself to have a good judge of character. Still, he couldn’t make sense of Krai Andrey. Since the strength of hunters was largely decided by the amount of mana material buildup in their body, a hunter’s appearance didn’t always reflect their strength. It was very feasible for a hulking man to lose to a tiny girl in a contest of brute strength. The buildup of mana material could be identified by sight with some practice. And as someone who’d had plenty of practice, Henrik just couldn’t see how Krai was considered top-notch. He wouldn’t have believed that Krai had a moniker, was a Level 8, nor was both the leader of the infamous Grieving Souls and the master of this enormous clan. Even now, he hardly believed it. Krai simply lacked a sense of authority.

“I am not complaining if he stops Liz and Luke from beating up everyone in their path,” added Sven.

Henrik closed his eyes and replayed in his mind the events in the training grounds: Liz had a burning aura and an almost murderous animosity that no hunter should bear in the middle of a city. Even through a closed door, Liz’s crushing presence and spine-chilling voice were terrifying enough for Henrik to find difficulty in breathing.

Of course he knew the Stifled Shadow, the troublemaker of Grieving Souls; there weren’t too many Level 6 hunters with a moniker either. After today, Henrik could surely say that she had the strength that matched her infamy. He had to admit that Krai at least had the guts to put himself between Liz and her apprentice.

“He couldn’t stop her though,” he muttered, still not entirely convinced.

Sven smiled and said, “You may not see it now, but Krai’s as much of a freak as any Griever. For one, he’s the only one *the* Ark Rodin—

the descendant of the hero and arguably the strongest hunter alive—has ever lost to. Another thing's that Liz and Luke follow his orders. It's easy to forget all these when you spend time in his clan. I'm not telling you to blindly follow his orders. Just...don't make the mistake of judging him by his looks or his words by how they sound. He always has more under the surface. It's what we always do, isn't it?"

Henrik was dumbstruck by the look in Sven's eyes. It didn't seem like he was talking about their clan master at all.

"Roger!" said Henrik loudly, as if to shake off his own doubt. Cold sweat dripped down his back as he realized that he'd been viewing Krai not as the Level 8 hunter that he was, despite knowing all that about Krai beforehand. In hindsight, that was unthinkable: if the Thousand Tricks had orchestrated all that on purpose, Henrik had no clue of it until now. This realization terrified him.

Sven spoke, encouragingly, "Don't sweat it too much. It's not like you're in trouble. Besides, Ansem's also a Griever. Krai can't pull anything too crazy as long as he's around."

Henrik finally looked relieved at this notion.

Every member of Obsidian Cross believed in the Holy God. Each of them possessed some power of healing, and Ansem Smart was renowned among the Clerics of the capital. Top-tier hunters usually wore multiple hats and lived busy lives, and Ansem was chief among them: it wasn't often even for Ansem's own clan members to come across him. Still, his reputation as the conscience of Grieving Souls was widespread. Ansem, who specialized in protection and healing, would help anyone in need—he was a stoic man full of love for his fellow hunters.

There were plenty of rumors about Ansem, some more believable than others: rumor had it that he cured a grand noble's daughter of what was considered to be an incurable disease, or that he had received offers to join the imperial knights' order, to name a few. Accordingly, he was responsible for keeping the Grievers in one piece through their grueling adventures.

"The Immutable—one of the best Clerics in the capital," muttered Henrik.

"He has no mercy for disloyalty, though. Perhaps too stoic at times, but you know you can count on him. If only he could join our party... Well, that's enough chitchat; let's hit up the Association—I want some updates on the blocked-off road too," concluded Sven despite Henrik's curious gaze.

By this point, there were no shades of dissatisfaction left on Henrik's expression. He wouldn't make the same mistake of underestimating Krai ever again. The Grievers had an unusual way of running their party which, at first, didn't sit right with Sven either.

The rest of the members aside, he couldn't help but see Krai as just an ordinary guy—as if he was a nonhunter.

Sven had to remind himself every now and again. While he considered it foolish to put more weight on someone's status over the in-person impression they made, the Thousand Tricks and his *impenetrable* camouflage had to be an exception.

As he watched Henrik, Sven recalled how First Steps was first created.

The hidden room connected to the clan master's office, a room with no windows to cause security concerns, was filled to the brim with my collection of Relics—amassed with a lot of time and money. I checked every piece of it and could only groan.

Dammit. Most of them are out of mana. This was just as I had feared, and it had pretty much sealed my fate. Collecting Relics was both my hobby and one of the very few means of self-defense I had. Many skilled treasure hunters packed a Relic or two just as an ace up their sleeve. But for the talentless like me, Relics, which produced the same effect regardless of user, were a lifeline.

Over my five years in the capital, I'd collected over five hundred Relics. My arsenal was comprised of Relics of all shapes and forms that would enable me to survive any situation if I utilized them proficiently—as long as they were charged with mana. Regular mana recharging was critical to keep Relics usable since the stored mana leaked out at variable rates even when the Relics weren't in use.

At the moment, most of my Relic collection was as useful as just a wall ornament: all my weapon Relics (which leaked mana the fastest) were kaput; the same went for my armor Relics. I was left with only a handful of Relics with juice in them, but the piddly amount of mana I held was nowhere near enough to bring these Relics back to working order. The Association generally recommended hunters only carry Relics they could charge themselves, but I'd always had Lucia—Magus of Grieving Souls—to charge my collection for me. Although she'd charged up all my Relics before leaving the city, I hadn't expected her to still be away. By now, even the Relics that were still usable wouldn't last long. My Safety Rings were exceptions as they retained mana much longer, but they were only insurance: they'd be useless if I was in a pickle.

Why would all this matter to me when I never left the capital anyway? I'm a chicken. Despite having tried, as I'd done, to remain in the shadows, I'd become pretty recognizable. That wouldn't have been a problem if it weren't for the population of criminals and hunters looking to make a name for themselves by taking out high-level

hunters. And so, I wouldn't dare walk down the streets without sufficient tools for defense or escape on me.

I tossed aside Night Hiker (now that it was out of juice, it was just a snappy coat) and fell onto the bed in the secret room. I couldn't so much as go out for ice cream if I didn't do something about this situation. Asking a clanmate to recharge the Relics was not an option: a few recharges here and there was one thing, but I had several *hundred* empty Relics on hand. There was no way any ordinary Magus could charge them all, especially when charging *any* number of Relics was a great burden—I'd be a pariah in my own clan if I'd demanded such a thing; my clan members may even call it an abuse of my power.

Liz was the only other Griever in town, but she was useless when it came to magic. I had once asked her to recharge my Relics, but after the third, she could barely stand from having her mana emptied; she still reached for the next one, and I had to hold her back.

Gazing at the ceiling, I took some deep breaths. *What are the other Grievers up to?* I would feel much more secure once they returned, even without Ark at my disposal. They should've been back by now if they'd gone through the vault as scheduled. Guessing from Liz's account, it wasn't that they were facing any trouble, but it was very possible they couldn't resist a detour.

Footsteps came from the hallway.

I jumped out of my bed, swooped up Night Hiker from the floor, and straightened my appearance.

Since the only entrance to this room was hidden behind a bookshelf in the clan master's office, which members were forbidden from entering without permission, there was only a short list of people who would come here. The Grievers ignored all rules and boundaries and barged in whenever they pleased, but none of them made audible footsteps; there was only one name on that short list who did.

There was a knock at the door, and I steadied my breathing before answering. The door slowly opened to reveal vice clan master Eva as I'd expected. She saw me holding up Night Hiker and cocked an eyebrow.

"What are you doing down here?"

That was a close call. She was used to finding me slacking off by now, but I didn't want to be chewed out for taking a full-blown nap during working hours. Especially since I was ignoring Gark's summons, I imagined that Eva would have a bone or two to pick with me as I'd always left her to handle all the managerial duties of the clan.

"Just looking into something," I mumbled, drawing a puzzled look from Eva.

Odd, I know, considering that I was in my private quarters. What could I possibly have been looking into in a room with nothing but Relics and bare-bones furniture? That being said, Eva was one of the few people who knew how truly useless I was. I expected her to read the room and let me be.

“Looking into what? Can I help you with it?” she asked, completely misreading the room. She couldn’t possibly have believed that I was actually looking into anything.

I averted her piercing gaze. “It’s all right. I had to do it myself. And I’ve just finished.” I smoothed the velvety coat Relic over a hanger.

What was I looking into down here? How? What’s something only I could look into? Did I have to do it now, instead of answering a summon from a bigwig of the Association?

I would have had so many questions for myself if I were in Eva’s shoes, and I didn’t have a good answer to any of them. Cold sweat began to form over my face.

Eva quietly sighed.

I’m done for. She knows I was just lazing around in my hideout instead of working. It wasn’t my fault though: I had no means to go outside!

“Is there anything I can help you with?” asked Eva.

“No, no, no,” I answered reflexively.

Eva frowned at my answer. Did she really believe me? I didn’t think there was a single thing about me that was trustworthy at this moment. Not to shift the blame for my lying or anything, but I’d be very surprised if she believed me given that she knew my true *modus operandi*. Was she pulling my leg? That seemed more likely than her taking my word for it.

Eva’s lavender-colored eyes scanned all over my face as if she was trying to read my mind. There was no telling from her expression if she really believed me or if this was her way of subtly admonishing me.

I quickly cleared my throat and said, “It’s not that I don’t trust your abilities, Eva. This is a...an extremely sensitive and...dangerous task. It has to be me; not even Ark nor Liz can help me with this.” Eva looked stricken, so I hastily added, “It’s not that big of a deal. Really. There’s no need for concern. I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it on my own. That was what I meant.”

For the most part, administrative staff held greater power than hunters in our clan. This was a rule I established at the beginning because I didn’t want to deal with hunters not following the administration’s directions. If I worried Eva to the point that weird rumors of me started circulating, I’d be in an awkward position. In

hindsight, I should've just said that I was inspecting my Relics, although it wouldn't have justified my ignoring Gark's request.

"Is it—"

"End of discussion," I said before Eva could continue. "And no more questions. I need you to keep this between us." I'd decided to sweep this under the rug before I incriminated myself. Even though only nominally, I still outranked Eva. This should keep her quiet.

Bitterness flashed across Eva's face and vanished in an instant.

"Understood, sir."

I didn't mean to put it this way, but Eva's time would've been much better spent doing her job than dealing with me.

I tried cracking a joke to defuse the awkward tension and said, "Well, if you really want to help, you can go scout out new ice cream shops in town for me."

"Yes, sir," said Eva, unsatisfied. Her lips didn't so much as twitch at my expert display of humor.

"So no changes in the local ley lines?"

Gark Welter, capital branch manager of Explorers' Association, grunted at the report in his hand. His intimidating features twisted further in frustration. That, combined with his stature that had remained as robust as it was years ago in his prime, was enough to make the messenger from the Third Order stand at attention. There were several divisions of imperial knights, and the Third Order was responsible for peacekeeping within the empire. It dealt with not only criminals, but also things like monsters, phantoms, and even natural disasters. Traditionally, whenever there were troubles in treasure vaults, its knights joined forces with the Association to solve the problems.

Gark stared at the report in stony silence. He'd never witnessed an incident like this. Ley lines were like the blood vessels of the earth: they fueled, in various ways, the lands they coursed through in a labyrinthine expanse of underground pathways. Powerful monsters were attracted to strong currents of power; utilizing the ley lines could enable large-scale magic rituals to be performed with minimal catalysts; and most importantly, the mana material that ran through the ley lines was the source of treasure vaults' manifestations. As such, most changes in a treasure vault's nature were caused by changes in the amount of mana material in the area. If the ley lines shifted in a way that they no longer pooled mana material in an area, the vault there would naturally disappear. But if the ley lines shifted and increased the concentration of mana material there, the vault would become noticeably more dangerous. It was even plausible that a

treasure vault could expand enough that phantoms from it would find their way to a major road outside the capital.

However, that was not what was happening now. Ley lines rarely shifted, so rarely that the most common cause was a major tectonic shift having been triggered by a sizable earthquake. But there had been no signs of an earthquake recently—a natural disaster like that would obviously have damaged the capital itself greatly. In those cases, ley line surveys would be conducted at the same priority level as rescues.

“If the ley lines haven’t changed, what’s the cause?” scowled Gark, racking his brain.

White Wolf’s Den was a Level 3 treasure vault, and phantoms appearing within should be of comparable strength. Phantoms were not precisely living organisms but imitations of life-forms generated with mana material. Their strength depended on the density of mana material in the area. While the obvious cause of this disruption would be a shift in the ley lines, the report produced by an expert team (guarded by knights) showed no sign of it. But it was undeniable that the vault’s level had been boosted: the phantoms in it had grown far stronger than they were before. While the details were still under investigation, the phantoms’ power was estimated to have increased by at least the equivalent of two to three levels.

With the massive population of hunters in the capital, the increase in White Wolf’s Den’s level wouldn’t be an issue. The stray phantoms that appeared on the roads could easily be dealt with now that the Association was made aware of them. However, the fact that the investigators still hadn’t figured out the root cause of these changes left Gark with a nasty feeling about it.

With eyes still on the report, he began to brainstorm. “Did someone cause this? But how?”

Treasure vaults were both perilous pits and nature’s greatest mysteries. Since the beginning of time, humanity had been investigating treasure vaults. And still, extremely little was known about them. There had been attempts to forcibly bend and twist ley lines to create new treasure vaults, to capture and transfer phantoms from their original vaults to another, to combine clusters of treasure vaults into one, and even to bind the generation of Relics to specific locations within vaults to allow safe and regular retrieval. But as far as Gark could recall, no artificial event in the past created effects that mirrored what they were witnessing now. Besides, every nation outlawed all experiments that manipulated the nature of a treasure vault or interfered with the flow of mana material: this was among the ten capital crimes—crimes that were considered the most heinous offense—in Zebrudian Empire’s law.

Gark imagined that workers of the empire's Vault Investigation Bureau (an institute dedicated to researching treasure vaults) were now frantically digging through their libraries. He contemplated for some time with his eyes closed, then he slowly opened his eyes and looked at the messenger knight as if he was glaring.

"We'll send a team too. Keep me in the loop if there's any progress."

At Gark's words, the knight saluted and left the room.

While White Wolf's Den was not yet a dire threat to top-level hunters, Gark was concerned that the vault could become more dangerous. Since it was close to the capital, if its threat level kept climbing and reached the point where no hunter could deal with its threats, the empire would be forced to migrate the capital city to a safer location. Solving this mystery was a matter of utmost urgency.

While Gark knew no leads, he knew someone who might. He exhaled deeply and turned to his assistant branch manager, Kaina.

"I'm talking to Krai. Send for him."

"He turned down your last request stating that he was too busy," pointed out Kaina.

"If he refuses again, tell him I'll be there myself," grunted Gark.

Hunters registered to Explorers' Association were obligated to follow the Association's orders in a state of emergency, but there were no clear definitions of what constituted an emergency. Hunters often refused the Association's requests, not to mention that First Steps was a formidable clan within the capital.

Feeling Kaina's discouragement, Gark added, "Don't worry. Even Krai won't bolt with all this going on. He knows something—I'm sure of it."

He straightened out the papers he had crumpled and handed them to Kaina, who still looked unconvinced.

"He hasn't stepped foot in any vault in ages but decided to hit up White Wolf's Den himself? That alone tells me there's something going on there that's worth his time," said Gark.

If any ordinary hunter had picked that quest out from the pile, Gark would've chalked it up to bad luck. But when it came to the Thousand Tricks, luck didn't interfere with his actions. The legacy Krai had established for himself in the past several years was enough for Gark to put his faith in Krai.

Kaina nodded to Gark's comment without further objection.

An old man sighed, gazing up above him. "How *unexpected*. Not even the gods could have predicted that high-level hunters would become involved."

He stood in a windowless but spacious room. Its walls and floor were made of dirt processed with alchemy and, thus, seemed refined. Along with pieces of basic furniture like desks, bookshelves, and chairs, numerous bizarre instruments populated the room. The most noticeable of which was a spiral glass tube in the center of the room with one end of it stuck in the ground. The glass tube vibrated as it emitted a faint glow.

In front of the glass tube stood the old man. His white hair and wrinkled features were befitting of his age. He wore a simple black robe enchanted with powerful magic, which was indicative of his exceptional career as a Magus.

In fact, the old man was once considered one of the best Magi in the capital—his title was the Master of Magi. The man, Noctus Cochlear, now served as the director of research in the capital base of Akashic Tower, an evil magic syndicate.

Behind him stood a quartet of his apprentices. His second apprentice, a man with serpentlike eyes, reported in a low voice, “It may only be a matter of time before Explorers’ Association discovers this location. I doubt the foolish masses of the empire would ever understand the grandness of your accomplishment, sire, but they won’t leave the space above us until they’ve uncovered the cause.”

Footsteps drummed above them from the cave that was White Wolf’s Den. The noise was projected into the room they were in via magic surveillance, meaning that the hunters were not necessarily directly above the room. In any case, the hunters showed no signs of abandoning their task nor leaving.

Treasure vaults were a matter of priority for Zebrudia as they were regarded as the epicenters of treasure hunting. They were important so much so that Zebrudia had a bureau dedicated to investigating vaults.

“I told you it was too early to throw hunters in,” said Noctus with audible disappointment.

The glass instrument before him was still working perfectly as intended, siphoning an enormous amount of energy from the ley lines to pool it where they stood. This was the product of Noctus Cochlear’s obsession—a dream he accomplished by pursuing research over any status or recognition. As the experiment progressed, Noctus expected that his device would even be able to generate treasure vaults at will. But there was still a long road ahead of him: his research was still largely theoretical *and* definitely not at a point where he could control it.

“I knew I should have said no regardless of the pressure they give me,” mumbled Noctus.

He had expected the changes in the vault to be discovered, but not

this quickly. They should've gone unnoticed until the experiment progressed a little further and the treasure vault became a little deadlier. It was why he'd chosen White Wolf's Den: it was one of the least popular vaults in the area surrounding the capital. But now, all his preparations were for naught. Throwing hunters into the vault before it was sufficiently leveled up triggered the dispatch of a powerful rescue party, leading to the Association discovering the results of their experiment.

Noctus's experiment was made possible by a monumental amount of financial investment. He couldn't fault his investors for demanding results, but Noctus couldn't help an irritated sigh at the politics of academia that followed him even to this illegal magic syndicate.

He did not expect the entrance to this lab (which was not connected to White Wolf's Den and was well hidden) to be discovered anytime soon. But now that they had drawn so much attention to the vault, he was left with no other choice.

"We will have to abandon this laboratory. Back to square one."

He wasn't ready to fight the empire.

Setbacks were commonplace in any experiment, and Noctus could deal with delays. He was familiar with pushback as he had once been banished from the empire for proposing a theory in blatant violation of the law. This experiment had only started to become promising a week or two ago, and there were still plenty of improvements to make—the powerful phantoms it had produced had been wiped out by the hunters. As long as their equipment was intact, they could continue their experiment in any treasure vault. Still, he was disappointed nonetheless.

"The phantoms overpowered Rudolph's party. I did not expect one of the three Level 8s in the city to show up," grumbled Noctus.

"Perhaps phantoms will always be phantoms no matter how powerful they become—they can't even tell when they're outclassed," chimed in one of his apprentices. They had all assisted with the experiment too.

The high-level phantoms generated by the experiment overpowered a Level 5 hunter and his party, which would make them equivalent to Level 6 or 7 phantoms—far beyond the expected threat of White Wolf's Den. Noctus had only agreed to bring hunters into the vault because he thought the phantoms were capable of wiping out the party. He'd expected a rescue mission to be issued, but not to a Level 8 hunter when the treasure vault was a mere Level 3. Even the super phantoms stood no chance against a Level 8.

"There was no way he could have known beforehand. The Thousand Tricks is more cunning than his reputation suggests," admitted Noctus.

Noctus was not a hunter himself, but he'd researched well those who could become his adversaries. Hunters who overpowered magic with brute strength were natural nemeses to Magi.

The Thousand Tricks was a famous Level 8 hunter; his level alone suggested that he possessed some sort of extraordinary power. But investigated as he did, Noctus found no clue as to what that power was. Apparently, the Thousand Tricks was a master of concealing information, for one.

Noctus couldn't see how their experiment, under layers upon layers of careful preparation, could be discovered, but he'd thought one could never be too careful.

Flick Petosin, Noctus's second apprentice, clicked his tongue in frustration at the derailment so close to success.

"And Sophia's on a *vacation* right now? What's she doing? She was in charge of the defense mechanisms."

The other apprentices chimed in to blame Sophia Black, the first apprentice to Noctus.

While she could learn to be more careful, she—despite not having been his apprentice for as long as the others had been—had extraordinary wisdom that had allowed her to contribute to the experiment the most meaningfully. As a result, they all assumed her to be Noctus's successor.

Great talent drew great envy, and the apprentices who'd served Noctus much longer than she had were not happy with the preferential treatment she received. However, her massive talent would soon stomp out their flames of envy.

It seemed like another stroke of bad luck that their experiments at White Wolf's Den had come to light exactly when Noctus's right-hand woman had been away for personal business. If she'd been in the laboratory, she might have suggested a better solution or even prevented the Thousand Tricks from leaving the treasure vault alive.

Noctus sighed quietly, patting the handle of his magic staff. "The experiment had not even kicked off when she was last here. Not even she could have foreseen this turn of events."

"That may be so," agreed the apprentices reluctantly.

Their experiment was considered taboo. As such, they had taken measures to defend it from law enforcement. There were still countermeasures they could take, but it was too risky for them to move to the offensive especially when they were lacking Sofia, who was the strongest on the team after Noctus. However, Noctus suspected that his apprentices didn't call for a fight for other reasons entirely.

"I have contacted Sophia via a Sounding Stone. She will be back soon."

Seeing that this statement livened up his apprentices' expressions, Noctus was secretly disappointed. All his apprentices were once top-tier Magi, each of them banished from the field because of their flawed characters or excessive ambitions. They were undoubtedly talented, but none of them would bat an eye at performing unethically cruel experiments.

Still, Noctus thought, they are not good enough to pursue the truth.

“Contact the capital. We cannot afford to allow the Thousand Tricks to continue to get in our way. We need to gather information.”

At Noctus's command, one of his apprentices rushed out of the room.

An experiment being ruined once was not detrimental to Noctus's cause. What was concerning was the fact that he knew nothing about how the Thousand Tricks discovered their plot nor how much he'd discovered. As long as there was a chance that the Thousand Tricks could continue to sabotage their operation, they had to make a move.

Noctus suspected that, in the worst-case scenario, he would have to fight a Level 8 hunter head-on. Even as he did, he showed no sign of distress. Dealing with a single hunter was nowhere as difficult as pursuing the truth in the abyss of unknown.

Chapter Two: A Nagging Nightmare

I had a nightmare.

I dreamed that the capital was burning; I dreamed that it was the end of the world.

The sky seared a deep crimson, and accompanying it was a cacophony of screams. Hunters, knights, merchants, and other residents alike were running for their lives. People flooded the wide streets in desperate attempts to flee the city, only to be trapped by the walls built to protect it. The capital city, Zebrudia, was surrounded by walls with exits that were far too few and narrow for its population. Evacuation stalled as people bottlenecked at these exits.

I watched it all unfold from an empty room somewhere far above the clan master's office. Through a bird's-eye view, I could clearly see the state of the capital and the reason the sky burned crimson. The historic imperial capital Zebrudia—which was nearing its three-hundredth anniversary—was flooded with a water that burned bright red.

The viscous liquid submerged the neatly constructed city almost as if it was a tsunami, even though there was no sea close to the capital. Besides, from where I was, I could see the liquid washing over the capital in a noticeable pattern: it was pursuing living creatures. It prioritized the fleeing children and elders, as well as knights who were struggling to keep the masses in order. Without exception, the liquid engulfed everyone it touched in flames and devoured them in a matter of seconds.

There was no sign of life left in the castle that stood in the distance. Half of the city was already a ghost town. A city with all its structure intact but void of all signs of life (not even a single body) was terribly ominous. There might still have been survivors within buildings, but escaping the city when the streets were filled with burning water was hopeless.

The fiery flood showed no indication of receding. In fact, it seemed to creep upwards by the second. The blazing water would soon overflow the city walls and wash over the entire world.

Then, I realized what was devastating the city. I recognized it. That was no water. That was a creature.

That was a deranged creation based on the weakest species of monsters in this world—the thing I had been warned to handle with

care but had (possibly) set loose by accident.

Now, a girl stood next to me, watching the city as I was. Her slightly droopy eyes gave off a kind impression, and her face was framed by a short set of pink hair. She wore an unremarkable gray robe, intended as a smock rather than one of those heavily enchanted robes Magi wore into treasure vaults.

The girl looked up with widened eyes like she just realized I was there. Despite the apocalypse below, her expression was relaxed.

She spoke as if we were just having a friendly chat, but her voice was so distorted that I couldn't make out what she was saying. Still, her eyes glimmered with blatant excitement.

I tried desperately to stop her, but my voice failed me. Agitation and despair racked my entire being. I managed to grasp her shoulders, but all she did was give me a shy smile and embrace me.

That wasn't a compliment!

I grasped her by her shoulders and tore her off me. With all my might, I shook her as she watched her slime with great satisfaction—

Then, I woke up.

I bolted upright on my bed in a lightless room and felt myself shiver. My back was drenched with cold sweat, and my heart wouldn't stop slamming against my chest. Nightmares were regular occurrences for a nervous wreck like me. But this one took the cake in recent memory.

What a crappy dream. It was weirdly realistic too, especially the part where she hugged me.

Breathing deeply and deliberately, I reminded myself that the capital wouldn't collapse that easily. Zebrudia was a powerful empire, boasting an undefeated knights' order, a magic unit of several hundred Magi, and a roster of powerful hunters based in the capital, both active and retired. In addition to its military strength, the empire led the world in research and technology too, making it the undisputed superpower in the region. With its web of perilous treasure vaults nearby, the capital city was arguably the best-defended city in the world. No country nearby would be able to deal with a calamity that would've demolished the capital of the empire.

Doesn't that mean we're all done for?

I tried to vigorously shake the memories of the nightmare out of my head, but the memories were very clear for some reason.

"There's no way it's gonna happen. I've never had a dream come true before."

"What's the matter?" called a sleepy voice from my left.

I thought I was alone.

I turned towards the voice to find Liz sitting there like this was *her* bed. I couldn't help but scowl at the sight of someone that resembled

Sitri in my nightmare so much. They were sisters after all. And while they had plenty of distinguishing features like hair length, eye shape, height, cup sizes, and skin tone, they looked alike enough that I wouldn't be able to tell them apart if they put in real effort to match their appearance—speaking from experience.

Liz smiled at me unabashedly and said, "Morning, Krai Baby. Sweet dreams?"

She stretched in her thin, loose-fitting nightgown and clung to my arm while my heart still pounded nervously. Her body temperature was much higher than mine, and so her embrace just made me sweat even more.

I'd identified the source of my nightmare: she definitely wasn't there when I went to bed.

Liz had always had this pesky habit of sneaking into my bed. I contemplated voicing my gripe, but I decided that mentioning my nightmare wouldn't be all that productive.

As I remained silent, her legs wrapped around mine, and I noticed a cold sensation as her anklet brushed my leg. It was Apex Roots, Liz's Relic, in its standby mode. Her boot Relic changed into a metal ring when not in use. Liz had told me that her motto was "never stop fighting," and so she wore her Relic everywhere—while she showered, while she slept, etc. She only removed her Relic for a few short moments a day.

A sweet fragrance from the tightly pressed Liz tickled my nose. Her embracing arms, breast, and slender legs felt powerfully warm and soft. As she rubbed herself against my skin, a sensual pleasure bubbled in the back of my mind. It was almost like she was a sophisticated girl or something. Shame that her hobby was destroying men she lured to her like this.

While I just sat there trying to control my breathing, Liz purred into my ear, "You wanna hang out today, Krai Baby?"

"What about Tino's training?"

"Well, I might break her if I push too hard. So it's a day off for her today."

"And *your* training?" I asked.

Liz had already mastered all teachings of her mentor and inherited the title of Stifled Shadow, but she was a hard worker. She usually stayed busy in the capital with Tino's and her own training.

She goofily smiled. "It's a day off for me too!"

Was she sure? I guess it wasn't my place to object.

I didn't know what she'd planned, but I'd feel safe leaving the building with her as my bodyguard. It's not like I had any plans anyway. This wouldn't be the first time she'd dragged me around town either.

I'd been hanging out with her in town more often since I'd stopped going into vaults with the rest of the party. Being a good party leader meant spending time with your party mates outside of work hours also. Well, I could *only* spend time with them outside of work hours, so I didn't want to let Liz down when she asked. It was a bonus that there was no chance of her going berserk while we hung out at least.

I decided to put that baseless nightmare out of my mind. That's all that it was: a nightmare. One caused by Sitri's needlessly cryptic warning plus Liz practically suffocating me. Really, what could I do about them?

"Sure, I'll hang out with you," I answered.

Liz squealed and buried her face into my chest.

"Thank you, Krai Baby!"

Patting the head of my overly affectionate friend, I let out a quiet sigh.

I got dressed and descended to the ground floor of the clan house with Liz, just as a familiar face came in through the front door. Standing there was a bald mountain of a man whom every hunter in the capital could've picked out from a crowd—Gark. He was wearing the Association uniform, and it couldn't have suited him worse.

Immediately, he spotted me.

I had to make a conscious effort to hide my apprehension of what was to come. I knew from experience that when Gark knocked on my door, it meant one of three things: there was some serious trouble brewing somewhere, I'd made some terrible blunder, or it was a bad time for me to turn down his summons. Regardless, none of them spelled particularly good news for me. Since he had Kaina *and* two other Association officers with him, he definitely wasn't here just to give me a talking-to.

"Krai Baby's *really* busy today," barked Liz before I could speak. "Can you not waste our time with whatever crap you came packing with? We're not gonna clean up after some weak-ass hunters who should have dropped dead a long time ago. Take a hike."

On her face was a blazing look that would've sent even most monsters running. She had been perfectly content just then, but now she was ready to bite before Gark had even said a word. It didn't matter if Gark was the manager of the association to which she belonged, nor if he had been a noble, a knight, a seasoned warrior, or someone she knew well—her attitude would've been the same.

Liz, while she'd coordinated her outfit in black as usual, wore a much more casual getup than usual: she wore a skirt in lieu of her tight shorts, let her hair down, and carried no weapon. However, her knee-high silver boot Relic stayed on, and she was irritably tapping

the floor with it.

Gark frowned at the little berserker and said, “Liz? Aren’t you supposed to be in Night Palace? I’ve told you to report to me after going through vaults of Level 7 or higher.”

After years of working with us, they knew full well how annoying dealing with a disgruntled Liz could be, and it was exemplified by how all colors drained from the faces of Kaina and the two other officers watching the exchange. Not a good time for butting heads.

Explorers’ Association was an expansive organization. And so, in order to keep hunters in check, many of its officers were former hunters—Gark Welter was no exception. In fact, he was once a Level 7 hunter who tore up vault after vault with his trusty halberd; his moniker—War Demon—was still whispered fearfully among those who knew him from back in the day. While years had passed since his peak days on the front lines, he could still go toe-to-toe with most hunters today.

To be more specific, when we Grievors first came to the capital, Gark, who was already branch manager at the time, mopped the floor with all six of us at once. That was our initiation into treasure hunting in the capital. Luke and Liz were relatively cooperative with Gark in part because of that experience. Meatheads of a feather flocked together. Alas, that was almost five years ago.

“You guys always need Krai Baby to carry you, huh?! We pay that rip-off of a fee every damn time. Figure it out yourselves!” Liz continued snapping at Gark.

A little girl (in street clothes no less) trying to intimidate a giant like Gark might have looked like a kid throwing a tantrum to the untrained eye, but Gark’s expression remained terribly tense. Since Gark had been away from vaults and the influx of mana material they provided for the past five years, his abilities had clearly deteriorated since that “initiation” of ours. He wasn’t even half as strong as he was in his prime if I had to guess. Liz, on the other hand, had grown incomprehensibly stronger since that skirmish, not that she ever had that kind of foresight when starting fights.

Gark hadn’t snapped back at Liz, and only glowered at her like she was a tricky monster to deal with. My teeth would’ve been chattering if I were in his shoes—Gark definitely had guts.

“Wait. If you’re here, is Sitri back?” asked Gark.

“No! You’re taking time away from our date. *Get lost!*”

One kick from Liz, and Gark went flying across the room. Skidding across the expensive marble floor, he knocked into some potted plants.

I could only chuckle at how ridiculously quick Liz was to fight. She started fights quicker than any other hunter or even bandit I’d encountered.

Gark uncrossed his arms from blocking the kick and slowly rose to his feet. Kudos to him for pretty much shrugging off a kick from one of the few freak hunters who took on Level 8 vaults. In contrast to his composed movements, his face had turned shades of demon—reminiscent of his moniker. What’s more, Gark was now looking for blood; he wouldn’t have lasted as an Association’s branch manager if he was the kind of man to walk away from a hit. Then, from his belt, he drew a dagger that would’ve looked more like a short sword in Liz’s hand.

“You’re gonna regret that, Liz. You finally wore my *enormous* patience thin.”

As if. It was paper thin to begin with.

Liz curled her lips. Her eyes blazed as her tanned skin turned even redder. I had just gotten the fire down to embers, and now the flame was roaring again.

Why are you guys so violent? Can’t we all get along?

They were going to tear up the clan house again. And it was me who’d be left to field Eva’s nagging after all.

Kaina and the other officers looked like they were trying to find the right time to step in—that ship had already sailed though. We could’ve had a thousand normies like us on our side, and we’d still stand no chance of stopping a pair of freaks from trading blows. Looking around the lobby, I saw that all the clan members who had been there had already evacuated.

I turned away from the freaks and asked the Association officers, “Do you want to go sit upstairs? I’ll make some tea.”

Having been dressed for a stroll, Liz was unarmed, and it wasn’t like she actually wanted to kill Gark anyway. He’d probably survive.

The sounds from below just kept coming, audibly shaking my window glass.

Weird. Lots of earthquakes today, I told myself. I’d decided to enjoy a normal conversation with Kaina and the other officers.

Truth be told, I felt like Kaina and I were kindred spirits: she had to deal with the terrifying and violent branch manager. And so, I always felt comfortable talking to her.

“Your receptionist is way cute,” I said jokingly. “How did you find her? I’d love to have a girl like her at our front desk.”

I took a lot of inspiration from the Association when it came to structuring my clan. Eva came to work with me only because I scoured the city for someone like Kaina, and I begged her until she agreed. What First Steps needed next was a good-looking receptionist. The Zebrudia branch of the Association was known for their receptionist

who was always energetic and polite even with scary or dirty hunters, or when I showed up for the umpteenth time to answer one of Gark's summons. I had guessed that this girl (whose name I didn't even know) played an integral part in running the branch smoothly. All men had a common weakness: cute girls. Hunters were no exception.

Kaina chuckled a bit. "You mean Chloe? She's Gark's niece."

"Ah," I said, "genetics is a myth after all."

The image of that nice girl on the War Demon's family tree was unsettling. But on second thought, maybe she was so good at dealing with hunters exactly because she'd practiced that with Gark.

Sigh. So I guess they've scored that receptionist through nepotism.

After we'd broken the ice with some small talk, I asked Kaina the reason for their visit. Apparently, much to my dismay, Gark had a terrible misconception that I had some intel on the changes in White Wolf's Den. But unfortunately for him, I was clueless. I had made no guesses nor did I plan to, because this wasn't my fault—for once! I'd experienced a small taste of the new vault through some sucky luck. But since I'd finished the quest I was pressured into taking, any further research fell within the responsibility of the Association and the empire.

He wasn't alone, but Gark tended to overestimate my abilities by a long shot. I'd only turned Level 8 out of dumb luck. If they only thought about it for a second, they would've realized that, with no useful knowledge nor skill, there was no chance I would've known any more than what the empire's or the Association's experts had found out through their research efforts.

Not. My. Problem.

"Sounds tough. So it doesn't have anything to do with the ley lines?" I lazily noted, but Kaina looked taken aback.

I knew that ley lines were like arteries in the ground and that any abnormality in their activity was unmistakable to any expert, but that was the extent of my knowledge—this stuff was more within the expertise of our Alchemist, Sitri.

Alchemists were considered to be a mix of Magi and scholars: they mastered the laws of the universe and cultivated them to produce desired effects. Alchemists were a rather rare breed for adventurers because they lacked damage output unlike Magi, who could utilize their vast reservoir of internal mana, and because they required rich knowledge and experience as well as rare items to reach their full potential. On the other hand, Alchemists were very reliable in times of crisis like this one.

Sitri stood apart from most of her colleagues because she had much firsthand experience from frequently diving into treasure vaults. And while she had some quirks, Sitri also held a position at the

empire's academic institute. She, a terrific Alchemist who'd earned the moniker "The Prodigy," was truly the brains of Grieving Souls. Despite that, she was also very reserved and respectful that I would've never pegged her as Liz's sister if I didn't know them so well.

On a side note, it's worth noting that generating magical creatures like slimes was one of the signature crafts of an Alchemist. *If only she was as good at keeping her creations safe.*

But unfortunately for us, she hadn't returned to the city.

"Is there *anything* you've noticed?" insisted Kaina.

Tough luck though. The fear of facing a treasure vault for the first time in years and my panic brought on by Liz's surprise arrival had left me with barely a sliver of memory of how the place *looked*, let alone of any leads. I sat back into my chair and tried to recall the events in the vault, but I had nothing—if there'd been anything unusual, I would've remembered.

"Well, nothing really," I said. "I've been worrying about another matter the whole day—"

Crap.

"Another matter?" Kaina's brown eyes watched me curiously.

I'd been so concerned with where that Sitri Slime could've gone that I couldn't care less about the changes in the vault; even now, my nightmare from last night still kept on replaying in my mind. Not that I'd have a chance at figuring out anything about the abnormal state of the vault if I'd tried, but I would choose to look for that damn slime if I had the time to do that kind of research.

"Can't you tell us?" asked Kaina earnestly.

I'd sooner die than tell her I'd misplaced a creation of Sitri's, of all things, especially when Sitri had warned me to handle it carefully.

You know what? I didn't misplace a Sitri Slime. It's all some big misunderstanding. I'm psyching myself out over nothing, I'd decided.

I laced my fingers together and stared at them in a way that looked like I was contemplating gravely. A Level 8 hunter carried many secrets with him.

"I can't. No, not yet. There're ears everywhere," I said to put her off the scent. I felt terrible about it.

"You mean..." The officers behind Kaina tensed up.

I couldn't stand to look at them, so I rose to my feet and turned away.

Look at the bright side, I thought. Maybe letting that slip would work to my benefit: it could be an excuse for me to turn down Gark's request. Because any irregular activity in treasure vaults affected the treasure-hunting community at large, I was fully willing to have First Steps cooperate in the research efforts. But now I could get out of doing the work myself, which meant that I didn't have to risk my life

nor sanity in the process. The Association wouldn't waste their time misinterpreting my clueless comments, and my hanging out with Liz instead of spending time on this research would quell Liz for a while—this was a win-win arrangement.

"I'm a bit tied up at the moment," I added, "but you have the full support of my clan. I know. Ark would be the best fit for the job; I'll request that he assist in the research as soon as he returns."

"Thank you...for your cooperation," said Kaina, keeping her eyes lowered.

Forgive me, Kaina. There's nothing I can do. The most specialized knowledge I have is a list of the best ice cream shops in the capital.

I almost felt bad being a Level 8, but they were the ones who gave me that rank in the first place. Besides, I was offering Ark as a token of apology for my ineptitude. That brilliant and multitalented guy could solve most problems, I was sure. I was *loaning* them Ark though, just for the record—I still needed him back.

Seeing that the officers were still despondent, I tried to console them. "You shouldn't get too worked up over it. If there're no changes to the ley lines, it won't take long for things to go back to normal."

The flow of mana material and all the aspects tied to it (like the evolution of phantoms) were a force of nature. There was very little we mere mortals could do about them.

Gark could hardly believe the girl's movements weren't some sort of magic. His extreme concentration made every second feel like several; even then, he couldn't react fast enough, let alone dodge any attack. With all his strength, he could only barely block Liz's attacks, even though she could cast no spell and had no weapon. Her only means of attack were just thrusts and kicks—they were simply too fast. Most Thieves were quick on their feet, but even Gark, in all his years as a hunter and an Association branch manager, had rarely seen a hunter *this* quick.



Stifled Shadow was the moniker of a hunter once known as the fastest Thief in the capital. When he'd heard that Liz had inherited the moniker after just a few years of training, Gark had laughed in disbelief. Now, the girl moved at least as fast as the previous Stifled Shadow.

Metal slid across the floor, leaving a trail of smoke from the friction. Liz had just braked from her top speed in an instant.

"Hmm, you've gotten soft, Gark," she said without a trace of her rage from before. "That's what happens when you loaf behind your desk all day."

"As if!" grunted Gark, swallowing his complaint. *I didn't get weaker. You got stronger.*

His body ached for fresh air. Hiding his heavy breathing, Gark glowered at Liz, who'd had her disrespect on full display.

While not his first weapon of choice, Gark had practiced the dagger to a certain degree. But the blade hadn't even served to limit Liz's mobility, let alone left so much as a scratch on her. It was like Liz didn't even see the dagger in his hand. Gark's every limb ached from blocking her attacks, where each blow felt bone-shaking despite being dealt by her skinny little arms. He could even be knocked out if a direct strike connected. Gark couldn't let himself be shown up by a mere hunter, but still, Liz had the upper hand undeniably.

While Gark was standing on guard, Liz looked as if she was maintaining her stance completely effortlessly. At this moment, Liz was stronger than she'd ever been with the mana material she'd absorbed from Night Palace, a Level 8 vault—she now had the most internal mana material she'd ever had. In contrast, Gark had been away from vaults for years. He was much bigger than Liz in stature (while her arms were long by proportion, Gark had a much longer reach), but she was vibrant with the sort of energy only seen in studious hunters who never stopped going into treasure vaults.

Gark was sure, after their exchange in battle, that he wouldn't stand a chance of landing a hit on her even if he was willing to take a direct hit to go for a counter: Liz could simply move out of range quicker than he could swing his blade. The disparity in strength that had once divided them when the Grievors had first arrived at the capital was now completely reversed. Gark had expected the Grievors to grow dramatically stronger after their explorations in high-level vaults, but experiencing Liz's growth set his heart ablaze.

Liz tapped her boots on the floor as if to mock the War Demon. "You gotta get some exercise, Gark. Did you gain some weight? Any hunter out there could take you on at this rate," said Liz, looking at him pitifully like he was a man on his deathbed.

“Enough!” shouted Gark, gritting his teeth as if he was trying to shatter them. *Not every hunter on the street is a Griever!* he wanted to add. *I know I’m rusty, but I’m still on par with a Level 5!*

He’d finally reached his boiling point. He’d even contemplated a counterstrike below the belt: demoting Liz to a lower level. Doing so out of spite would be a massively inappropriate move though.

Liz smiled and said, “The door’s behind you. I feel bad that you’ve gotten so weak, so I’ll let you walk out right now. See? This is how you spread kindness, not hate.”

For a moment, Gark couldn’t process what Liz had said; in the next, he was seeing nothing but red. Wrath boiled in the pit of his stomach—a sensation he hadn’t felt in a long time—and he squeezed his dagger’s hilt until it cracked.

Gark was a Warrior-class hunter, a master of all weapons. One of the techniques he had mastered was to channel his explosive anger into strength, an ability that had contributed greatly to him earning his moniker. He hadn’t had the chance to utilize it for a long time, but apparently his muscle memory remained.

“Time for a life lesson, you little turd,” he said, his voice booming as if it came from the pits of hell.

Liz scoffed, “No, *thank you*. I’m not good with elderly care. You gotta ask Kaina for that.”

By now, several Steps hunters were watching the conflict with interest, and a fearful crowd was growing outside the front door.

While Gark still recognized the giant chasm between their power levels, he wasn’t going to let Liz walk away without getting at least a lick in.

His dagger’s hilt had shattered in his hand, and his only weapon had fallen to the ground. But Gark paid it no mind and moved a step closer to Liz.

Just as he did, a languid voice called. “You’re still going at it?” asked Krai. “Look at this mess. We already settled everything upstairs. So, here, Gark, calm down.”

His timing seemed too perfect.

What’s more, Gark had never noticed Krai leaving the room, but Krai had just descended the stairs with Kaina and let out a sigh.

Liz, who had maintained her attention on Gark throughout her mockery, dropped the combative air about her and leaped onto Krai. “Hey, Krai Baby, Gark here just wouldn’t listen to reason...”

“We have to get contractors in here,” went on Krai.

Meanwhile, Kaina tensely approached Gark, who still stood ready to fight. Seeing the look on his officer’s face, Gark finally relaxed. He took deep breaths as the pain all over his body began to come back. There was no serious injury, but Gark suspected that he had sustained

a few fractures.

Gark frowned as he dreaded a prospective talking-to from Kaina—apparently, Kaina had completed their objective while he and Liz were exchanging blows. In any case, he'd resolved to train himself back in shape again so as to never let himself be ridiculed by a bratty hunter again.

Grieving Souls had many enemies: it was mostly because Luke and Liz kept starting fights everywhere they went. They were willing to travel days in a direction to challenge a master Swordsman or massacre a group of bandits that had defeated a knights' order's battalion. It wasn't hard to imagine how much of a nuisance they were when they didn't even bow to any power. Not that we had a good reputation now, but if there hadn't been a general affection for strength among hunters, we might've been kicked out of the capital by now for causing so much trouble.

With our eerie party name, we'd also been attacked from time to time being mistaken for bandits or a ghost party, which were hunters who specialized in taking not-exactly-legal quests. Those misunderstandings were few and far between in the capital now, but my fellow Grievors had told me that they still experienced that when they traveled far-off from the city.

"Time is a cruel mistress, isn't it? How far Gark has fallen," said Liz upon reflection as she walked beside me; she wasn't deriding Gark though. She might have provoked him just to trigger his wrath, but now she sounded almost disappointed that she'd lost a worthy rival.

"I don't think he's *fallen*," I said. "It's not fair to compare him to you when you're still out in the field."

"Yessir."

Gark really wasn't weak at all. I'd seen him here and there breaking up drunken fights among hunters by beating up both sides. And his face was still as scary as it always had been. It's just that a decline in strength was inevitable whenever a hunter stepped away from vaults—even the brazenly confident Liz would lose some of her strength one day.

That was one reason many hunters moved from their base of operations when they retired. Most of the treasure hunters who doubled as mercenaries or bounty hunters made quite a few enemies over the course of their careers. That wouldn't be a problem while the retired hunter was still strong enough to fend them off, but what would happen as their strength declined? They couldn't risk having an old grudge strike after they'd grown weak.

But someone like Liz would never back down from a fight. While

the rest of the Grieviers had no plans of retiring anytime soon, I had been looking into a few places I'd like to move to once I retire.

Then I recalled, once again, how Gark looked far too enraged to have only received a little teasing from Liz. I thought he knew how impossible Liz could be, but maybe he finally snapped. Gark had a competitive side too—he might be off to a treasure vault at this very moment.

Liz and I continued walking down the streets of the capital, chatting as we went. Despite the apparent turbulence that was striking the Association, the city, by and large, seemed as peaceful as ever. Amid the tranquil atmosphere, Liz's revealing outfit, contrasted by her robot-like boots, drew much attention to us. Of course, she seemed utterly unbothered by those gazes and seemed perfectly content. If only she was always this chill.

We'd been discussing the Grieviers' latest treasure hunt at Night Palace. There were a few treasure vaults that hunters rarely took on for various reasons: they were in an inconvenient location or terrain, their phantoms were too strong, they dropped only certain types of Relics, and so on. In any case, mana material would eventually become too abundant in these vaults to a point where they would grow extremely dangerous because of it. Night Palace was one such place—a Level 8 castle defended by a plethora of phantoms. Apparently the vault was based on mythology and thus the great variety of phantoms. Yet, the difficulty in prepping for all those challenging monsters and its remote location had left the vault untouched by hunters for a long time, much more so than White Wolf's Den. And while White Wolf's Den was left alone because of its unprofitableness, Night Palace was feared for its difficulty.

No hunter was known to have traversed it successfully, and so there was close to no information about the place available. Even the few hunters who were drawn out there by the rumors of abundant Relics abandoned their plans after one look at the vault from afar.

As terrified as I was when the other Grieviers mentioned Night Palace as their next objective, I couldn't bring myself to hold them back as they excitedly told me about it. I was their leader, so the final decision of the party rested with me. There was a chance that they wouldn't have gone if I'd stopped them, but how could I sabotage their path to heroism? Besides, Liz came back safe and sound, vindicating my choice to let them go.

Liz's recount of their adventures was more passionate than usual, featuring an impressive array of phantoms. I recognized the famous ones like dragons and griffins, but then there were plenty of names that meant nothing to me. Squonks? Jaculi? What kind of creatures were those anyway?

“Sitri said they could’ve come from the legend of Dark Lord Graps. There’re a lot of intelligent humanoid phantoms too; so it was like a mishmash of legends. I didn’t expect anything *too* big since we were indoors, but there was this rift in space-time—”

“Really? Were they strong?” I asked, holding back a plethora of other questions I had.

Dark Lord Graps was a tyrant who’d supposedly ruled the continent thousands of years ago. Legend told of him controlling numerous beasts at will and creating many creatures that *shouldn’t have existed* through sinister rituals. That was way before the empire was established, but his vast influence was still seen in phantoms that resembled his servants, found in treasure vaults throughout the continent. All in all, he wasn’t very liked by hunters.

Liz pondered my question while tapping her lip, then she beamed at me and said, “Hmm...the strongest one we’ve faced so far? It does live up to its level. Those Graps’s beasts are tough to crack—I bet they were way stronger than the real ones in the legends. You can’t do much to them with physical attacks, and they form hordes; to be honest, I was getting kinda sick of them. We could at least manage to get away from them though.”

Then why do you sound so happy about it?

I could never imagine how dangerous a phantom that even Liz—whose strength I already couldn’t comprehend—was sick of was. She could catch bullets, and she still had a tough time dealing with them?

“What do you think of them compared to the boss in White Wolf’s Den?” I asked.

That wolf knight with a human skull stood out even among the newly invigorated vault, greatly setting back a party led by an experienced Level 5 hunter. Even though I hadn’t fought the thing directly since Liz had come to the rescue just in time, just thinking of those eyes glimmering through the skull mask made me want to immediately retire from hunting.

Liz stopped walking and twisted her brow in contemplation for over ten seconds before apologetically saying, “Was there a boss?”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sure there was if you say so, Krai Baby. I’m sorry. I don’t really remember all the *trash* in there. I just remember how pathetic T was and how some pieces of trash didn’t know their places.”

Compared to Level 8 phantoms, even that boss wasn’t worth a second thought apparently. It didn’t look like there’d ever be another hunt where I’d join the other Grievors in. I wasn’t upset by that fact, nor did I regret my decision to build a clan and step away from the front lines; I felt a twinge of loneliness that the results of our

assessment of vaults and phantoms had grown apart so much.

Liz saw the look on my face, and she clasped my hand in her own. “But you know! They’re pieces of trash that come with all sorts of weapons; I could use them for T’s *training*! I wished they had nonphysical attacks too, but don’t you think they’d be great for T?”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t really care about that.

“Right? I’ll take her down there next time. When you train with humans, they always hold back. It’s not real training if your life’s not on the line, right?”

Crap. I should’ve disagreed. Now Tino was doomed to a series of life-and-death training. I should make it up to her by taking her out for ice cream sometime.

With Liz leading the way, walking through the city hand in hand made me feel relaxed for the first time in a while—we must’ve looked like an ordinary couple.

Liz was a fierce and curious hunter who loved to fight. But whenever I went out with her, she preferred typical hangout spots: shopping at boutiques, jewelry stores, and stopping at cafés. She didn’t like going to bars, weapon shops, nor even fishing for attackers by walking down abandoned alleys. I suspected that even Liz got tired of the stress that came with training and going into treasure vaults once in a while. Maybe this was her way of recharging.

When Grieving Souls went on a hunt, we split the profit, after subtracting expenses for supplies, evenly among members. But since Liz rarely wanted many things, she was loaded—unlike me who always blew my share on Relics.

Liz wore a leather pouch on her belt that served as her wallet, and it was filled to the brim with coins. Her full pouch contrasted greatly with my wallet. Mine only contained five imperial gold medallions (equivalent to five hundred thousand gild) that Eva packed me with for emergencies and a meager ten thousand gild of my own money.

It was pretty refreshing to see Liz buy expensive clothes and jewelry. Only that I hesitated to answer her question of whether a piece of clothing looked good on her every time she tried one on. All in all, it wasn’t too bad though. I didn’t understand the expensive clothes she picked, but they all looked great on her. I wished I could’ve bought some for her, but I could only do so if there were two fewer zeros on their price tags... I couldn’t very well dip into the clan’s emergency fund, could I?

During our date, I kept one ear open for any sign of the Sitri Slime, but there was no indication of it. People were talking about the northern road being shut down, but considering the timeline, the shifts in the vault and the appearance of phantoms along the road happened before I lost the slime—there was no way that could’ve

been my fault.

“What’s the matter, Krai Baby? You look a little down,” said Liz with concern, even though I didn’t think I was showing my fear.

I felt bad I was making everyone worried for me. And so after a few moments, I carefully asked, “Liz, if, hypothetically, all of Zebrudia came crashing down, what would you do?”

Liz could’ve taken the sudden question as a joke, but she quickly answered without asking any questions in return, “Let’s run away together.”

Well, we couldn’t do that.

“Maybe somewhere tropical. I’d love to see the ocean. I never have.”

She sounded very optimistic for a hypothetical end of the empire. Still, watching Liz daydream about a tropical getaway eased my stress a little bit.

I’d do what I can. But if that wasn’t enough, it wouldn’t be so bad to make a run for it like Liz’d just said. Going to see the ocean didn’t sound too bad.

“You can’t run underwater, you know,” I pointed out.

“How would you know?”

Easy. Laws of physics.

“There’re supposed to be vaults under the sea,” went on Liz. “They’ve gotta be gorgeous. I’ll have to figure out how to breathe underwater. Ooh, and I’d love to fly above the clouds too! The capital’s a convenient place to live in, but after all these years—you know.”

She sounded just like she was planning a vacation.

As we continued to walk down the street with me nodding along to Liz’s chitchat, Liz’s expression suddenly grew tense. And before I knew it, she had let go of my arm. By the time I heard her shopping bags hit the floor, she was already pinning a man on the ground a few meters ahead. She had him by the wrist with one foot on his back—a flawless lock. I was walking next to Liz, and even I couldn’t follow her tackle the man; I doubted he even knew what had hit him.

The poor sap whimpered in pain. He was a bearded man of my height with a brown coat; he didn’t look all that remarkable and definitely didn’t look like a hunter.

I stood there dumbfounded for a second before running over. Hunter-on-normie assault was a big no-no, especially when the attack was unwarranted. Despite Liz’s violent nature, she hadn’t attacked a nonhunter in a long time. Just as I thought she was starting to become more reasonable, *now what was that just now?*

“Wh-Whatcha doin’, Liz?” I asked, pale with fear undoubtedly.

Passersby awkwardly hastened their steps. It was only a matter of

time before the peacekeepers arrived.

On the brink of breaking the man's arm, Liz maintained her grip while keeping her eyes fixed on him beneath her foot. With an ice-cold stare, Liz pressed her foot harder on his back. The guy struggled, but her grip didn't budge.



“He was staring at us,” said Liz.

So?

I hardly thought a single stare deserved to be met with such cold-blooded assault. With Liz’s vibrant demeanor drawing a lot of attention, I’d been noticing plenty of glances throughout our stroll. What made his gaze so offensive to her?

The man let out another agonized groan, and so I took Liz’s arm and pried it off his arm. “Uh, let’s start by letting go. Okay?”

The man sat up and coughed as Liz stepped off him, gazing up at us with fear in his eyes. He really seemed like an ordinary middle-aged man of a normal build with neither scars nor weapons—he was just another law-abiding citizen. Liz’s action, on the other hand, was far from law-abiding. As much leeway as the capital’s administration allowed hunters in their actions, they didn’t go so far as to give hunters a pass for attacking normies.

I extended my hand to help him to his feet and said, “I-I’m sorry; she’s mentally unstable. Are you hurt?”

The assaulted citizen didn’t take my hand and ran away in a tizzy—with Liz’s boot print still on his back—after letting out a short cry. Behind him, Liz frowned as he fled.

He’s not hurt then. What a relief. Well, it wasn’t exactly a relief: there was no telling what would set Liz off, and that wasn’t good for my heart.

What now? What part of that interaction ticked you off?

Up until this point, Liz had been (relatively) well-behaved. But I had to get us out of here before a crowd formed and looked at me with that familiar look on their faces that said “You again?”

As I stood there itching to get away, Liz remained still in contemplation before crooking her neck and said, “Wait a minute. You were stringing him along.”

Stringing him along? What in the world was she talking about?

I couldn’t be bothered by every staring eye; it wasn’t like their gazes were hurting me anyway. What did Liz expect when she wore boot Relics that could be spotted from the other end of the capital?

“You’re getting a talking-to later, Liz,” I said.

“You’re too good of an actor!” she said, returning to her cheerful mood. “It went right over my head, and I’m usually pretty good at this stuff. I’ll be more careful next time.”

Navigating the capital was as familiar as strolling through his own backyard for the man. He knew every path, from the busiest main roads to the darkest alleys that most law-abiding citizens avoided. But

now, as he sprinted with all his might like prey escaping an apex predator, he had no time to think. His oxygen-deprived brain was burned with the image of the pair of bone-chilling eyes that had locked onto him; no pedestrian dared stand in his way after seeing his expression.

Only after running for half an hour did the man turn around, as his shoulders rose and fell with each ragged breath, to confirm that he hadn't been pursued. He'd arrived outside a dingy building in the "decaying district," the capital's southwestern neighborhood that was more run-down and crime-ridden than the rest of the city. He knew that he wouldn't have made it this far if his assailant didn't want him to. In fact, he would've never escaped her grip in the first place if she really wanted to keep him there. As slender as her limbs were, they had felt like a pair of vises that pinned him in the most efficient way possible; it even felt like he was tied up from head to toe.

A dusty ray of sunlight peeked into the alley and illuminated his vision, now blurry from exertion, as he regained his composure.

"What...just happened...?!" Out of breath, he clasped his arms which were shaking nonstop.

He hadn't walked half-heartedly into the mission against a Level 8 and a Level 6 hunter. He could've sworn that he hadn't done anything to betray his identity. His targets had already been drawing a lot of attention in the crowded streets—there had been no way to distinguish his attention from anyone else's when he hadn't even made any moves against them.

The nonhunter's sole objective had been to observe them, with his top priority being to avoid detection. He'd been confident in his ability to do so. He'd dressed and acted inconspicuously, following the couple from a safe distance without staring for long nor showing any animosity; he'd even made sure to always remain in their blind spots. As someone who was a master of Thief techniques, he'd taken every precaution perfectly. Truth was, he didn't so much as suspect that he had been noticed until his face was on the ground.

Clutching his arm, which still throbbed in pain from the detainment, the man controlled his breathing. As much as he wanted to chalk it up to bad luck, there was no denying that his cover had been blown by the Stifled Shadow. The question was, "Why did the Thousand Tricks release him after going through the trouble of detaining him?" He couldn't fathom why they'd let a man who'd been stalking them go scot-free. If it'd been their intention to let him be, there'd been no reason for the Thousand Tricks to have his companion detain him. What was more, the Level 8 hunter even gave him a deliberately fake apology. Although the man would've kept his lips sealed through interrogation or torture, he was troubled by the fact

that he was set free.

Was that a warning? Dammit! How much does he know?

He gritted his teeth. It was inconceivable that information about the syndicate had been leaked—their plan was perfect, or so it seemed.

When Noctus Cochlear had ordered him to keep an eye on the Thousand Tricks, he'd thought the scientist overly cautious. But now the image of the young hunter's face flashed before his eyes, making him tremble all over again.

Behind that building, the man remained until dusk fell upon the city.

White Wolf's Den is over. Worse, he knows about us, he thought.

Regardless of what the Thousand Tricks wanted to do with that information, the syndicate's situation couldn't have been any worse. He'd have to notify the team that they'd have to change their plans.

Not a soul was watching the man as he stumbled into the darkening alley.

Chapter Three: The Slime and the Assembled Team

The capital city of Zebrudia was surrounded by sturdy walls intended to keep monsters out of the city. From a bird's-eye view, one could see the rectangular outline of the city with the emperor's castle in the center. The walls of the capital grew with the city, expanding in conjunction with the city every time it grew bigger. Because of how the city was organized, the city became increasingly old and energetic the closer one got to its center.

Neighborhoods near the city walls, except for the four gates necessary for traveling in and out of the city, were the worst in the city. The western neighborhood was the most dangerous among them, being crisscrossed by haphazardly laid alleys barely wide enough for three people to walk side by side. The cramped alleys, which stayed dark even during the day, were accompanied by patchworks of crowded buildings as if the sprawl of the city was physically confined by the city wall—a stark contrast to the vibrant and spacious infrastructure near the center of the capital.

The southwestern decaying district of Zebrudia was a place averted by most residents even under daylight. Even the peacekeepers stayed away from this area barring when there were reports of serious crimes. Those who lived there were either impoverished or had run-ins with law enforcement: hunters expelled from the Association for committing crimes, dealers of illegal merchandise, sellers who could mysteriously sell items at ridiculous discounts, members of criminal syndicates, and even notorious hunters who were forced into hiding for one reason or another. This neighborhood was the melting pot of the capital's chaotic mixture of the good and the evil, and of the useful and the useless.

Picking out the few-and-far-between valuable treasures from such a place required authority, fame, funds, and connections—none of that had anything to do with me of course.

We were now walking through and taking in the view of the decaying district, which I'd barely set foot in since arriving at Zebrudia. There were eyes on us. A child was watching from a small space between two houses; a wary look was coming from the second-story window of a house that looked ready to collapse any minute. It wasn't the warmest welcome, but we weren't here to start fights with

them. Since I couldn't have come across as a stronger hunter, I assumed visitors like us were an unusual occurrence.

"Krai Baby, what are we doing here?" asked Liz, who was far more prone to violence than anyone in this district.

Liz was picky about many things, but she rarely refused favors I asked of her.

Today she looked more like a hunter, unlike the other day when we'd gone on a date. She wore shorts and a minimal outfit in black and red that maximized her mobility. She'd also slung a pack full of potions and lockpicks on her belt for easy access and had adorned her right forearm with her weapon of choice: a special wrist guard. Combined with the Apex Roots that she always kept on her feet, Liz was in full-blown hunting gear. I would've worn more protective armor if I were in her shoes, but I supposed that's what being a Thief was all about.

"Don't let your guard down," I said.

Liz wrapped her arm around mine, and a trace of sweet scent wafted over. "I wouldn't know how to. I'd never let my guard down when I'm protecting you, Krai Baby," she said.

It certainly seemed like she was letting her guard down, but maybe an excellent hunter like her had a different definition of "letting one's guard down."

"Besides, this place is my backyard," she added. "Let's just think of this as part two of our date."

"Do you come to these parts often?" I asked.

"There were a bunch of pickpockets and plenty of attacks against us when I came with T or Siddy. But I haven't been back here in a while," she said.

That wasn't exactly the answer I was expecting. But now that I thought about it, it seemed strange that no one had attacked us—let alone approached us—in this notoriously crime-ridden decaying district, especially when I was decked out in Relics that looked like expensive jewelry. Upon closer inspection, people who looked like obvious thugs and desperate ex-hunters always stayed clear of the street as soon as they spotted Liz.

Meanwhile, she was happily humming a tune. I decided not to worry myself over the situation.

"Tell me if you see something," I said.

"Hmm? What does *something* look like?"

Liz was always on my side, and I trusted her more than I trusted myself. So, after hesitating for a few seconds, I said, "Something *slimy*. Just in case it does show up."

"Many children have recently disappeared from the decaying district," Eva had told me last night. Apparently, she'd gone to

research strange occurrences in the capital even after I told her not to bother. Though that was very considerate of her when she, unlike me, had *real* work to do on top of that.

Well, the decaying district was a lawless land. It was one of the most dangerous places in the capital to be; not even the peacekeepers came near it unless it was absolutely necessary. Some rumors even alluded that certain mafia gangs and evil syndicates called this place home. If I had it my way, I would've never come anywhere near this place. In fact, this was my first time seeing the district in person.

Even *if* I'd dropped the Sitri Slime somewhere, I had only handled its container during my brief flight from the clan house to White Wolf's Den. The decaying district was not on that route, so it was extremely unlikely that the slime had anything to do with the missing children.

But still, Liz and I found ourselves here because I wanted to explore even the slightest chance of finding the slime...and partially because Eva had included a tip about a well-known ice cream shop in the district. Apparently she'd taken my joke about searching for new ice cream places to heart—I loved that about her. This particular establishment was famous in the district for providing ice cream to its less well-to-do residents at a very reasonable price. I couldn't ignore *critical* information like that.

I explained to Liz our reason for being here (except the part about ice cream), and she looked almost bored.

"Children, huh? You've too much time on your hands, Krai Baby. There are so many of them here. I don't think anyone misses them."

As the rumors had made it seem, the district was a truly miserable place. People shouted and screamed in the distance intermittently, alleyways formed a maze strewn with piles of trash on every corner, and the air consistently carried a horrible stench that I suspected to have emanated from the canal nearby. No wonder the peacekeepers didn't want to patrol here—this was a place no sane person would choose to visit.

But not even the resilient people of the decaying district dared make eye contact with Liz.

"You haven't killed anyone here, have you?" I asked.

"Just like you told me, I *never* throw the first punch."

That wasn't an answer to my question.

Just from our quick stroll so far, I could see that Liz was right that the decaying district was much more populated than I'd imagined. Adults, along with children in rags, were casting curious glances our way. Unlike Liz, whose slenderness was due to her perfectly toned muscles, many of them looked like they were on the verge of malnourishment. The capital was considered a prosperous city by and

large, but I supposed poverty lay in the shadow of all prosperity.

“So, Krai Baby,” said Liz, returning an intimidating glare at the onlookers, “what’s the plan? I don’t think asking *them* questions would be of any use.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “It’ll be obvious.”

“Of course it will be, Krai Baby!” cheered Liz.

I was neither here to solve the pressing poverty issue nor search for those missing kids. The only reason I was here was to look for the Sitri Slime, which I *might* have dropped somewhere. If the slime was nearby, it would’ve wreaked tremendous havoc by now, but luckily for me, I hadn’t seen any disaster zones so far. And if our Thief, Liz, wasn’t picking up on anything, chances were that the slime wasn’t around.

Feeling relieved but somewhat surprised, I muttered, “This might turn out to be a normal date after all.”

“Why’s that?” asked Liz. “You think you’re too intimidating?”

“If either of us is intimidating, it’s you.” Not that I knew if slimes were capable of fear though.

For some reason, Liz reacted to that by beaming and wrapping her arm around mine. Anyway, I decided to set course for the ice cream shop and keep an eye out along the way.

The scrawny guy in a black jacket and the girl exposing her shoulders and midriff stuck out like a sore thumb in the decaying district. Despite the pair being obviously wealthy, no one ventured to mug them.

While peacekeepers didn’t service the decaying district, the district had its own code. Among them was a commonly known rule to *never* mess with certain people, and on top of that list of “certain people” was Liz Smart, the Stifled Shadow. She was considered a mortal threat to the decaying district because she was quicker to violence than a bandit and ruthless enough to take out anyone—no matter their gender or age—who defied her.

An elder swiftly brought this information to a man in a structure among the rows of paint-stripped houses. He came not only because he was paid to watch the entrance of the district, but also because Liz’s face was widely recognized by everyone in the district.

“Impossible. This can’t be,” muttered the man to himself in disbelief. “I was *not* followed. There’s no way they could’ve known.”

Akashic Tower was the largest magical syndicate out there, and its members’ goal was to pursue the ultimate truth. But since they did so at all costs, they were wanted worldwide. Yet still, Akashic Tower garnered a lot of supporters because it boasted a roster of powerful

Magi and access to robust technology. The syndicate had grown to its current size by recruiting a significant population of Magi who had resorted to illegal experimentation in their relentless pursuit of knowledge and power. And while several forces were lurking in the shadows of the decaying district, the Tower reigned atop them all with its deep pockets and forces powerful enough to defeat elite hunters.

The man who had muttered to himself was an agent of an Akashic Tower field unit. As such, he was confident in his combat abilities and had his fair share of fighting experience—against nonhunters, that was. His chief duties in the syndicate were reconnaissance missions; he couldn't slow down a high-level hunter.

"Dammit! What do I do?! What do I do?!" He agitatedly scanned the room.

The decaying district served as a vital base of operations for the Tower because of its lawlessness. Even though the Tower's current experiment only took place in treasure vaults, the man had plenty of things in the room that, if fallen into the wrong hands, could severely damage the Tower: reports of their experiments, rare and dangerous catalysts that were illegal to trade in the empire, and *the creatures* in the basement. If any of them were brought to light, it would greatly sabotage their experiments in the capital.

If that were to happen, the man wondered, how would the Master of Magi react? Noctus Cochlear was a man of reason, but he wasn't so soft as to give second chances. Picturing Noctus's dark eyes that seemed to gleam with a force unbecoming of the Magus's age, the agent shuddered.

Could he remove the documents and materials before the hunters arrived? No, there'd be no time if they were heading here straight away. On the other hand, how much did the hunters really know? The man had no way of telling.

He'd always covered his tracks with utmost care. With how many most wanted lists the Tower was on throughout the world, they couldn't afford a single mistake. None had been made until now, but even their patrons with powerful positions within the empire wouldn't risk their own power to protect the syndicate if a high-level hunter presented them with direct evidence against Akashic Tower.

As the agent stood in turmoil, another tip came at his door: the Thousand Tricks was heading for the ice cream shop.

All hope had been lost.

Obviously, the clan master of First Steps knew all their secrets. There was no denying that he, at least, had strong suspicions about the Tower's operations.

There was only one ice cream shop in the district that was the

shadowy side of the empire. One of the benefits of operating out of an area as seedy as the decaying district was the abundance of subjects for experimentation—people no one would miss. Children, who lacked judgment and strength, made for the best subjects especially when they were so easy to attract. With only something sweet, syndicate agents could make them disappear at the most inconspicuous times.

Their ice cream shop cover, which the syndicate had not been entirely convinced of before bringing it to operation, was functioning much better than they'd expected. The agent wondered if that was what had drawn the hunters' attention, but he told himself again that they'd concealed their operation perfectly. With or without the Tower's doing, it wasn't a rare occurrence for children to disappear in the urban jungle that was the decaying district anyway.

Racked with regret, the agent reasoned that the hunters' investigation was at least a sign that no definite proof about the syndicate had yet reached the empire itself. At this point, however, the agent saw no other way to avoid detection other than to destroy all evidence and completely halt their experiments in the empire—until it dawned on him: he just had to eliminate the Thousand Tricks and the Stifled Shadow.

If it weren't for the Thousand Tricks in particular, Rudolph would've never survived White Wolf's Den and revealed the changes that the syndicate had brought about to the vault. The average hunter wouldn't have stuck his neck out that far, and the Association and the empire rarely overstepped the scope of their duties.

The Thousand Tricks was the syndicate's greatest threat at the moment.

This revelation brought no more hope to the agent however. He had no reservations about killing; he had plenty of experience doing that. He just simply didn't know how he could pull off killing one of only three Level 8 hunters in the capital. The agent knew full well from experience that high-level hunters were nothing short of freaks, and as a mortal man, he had no means of killing one. While the Thousand Tricks looked like nothing more than a scrawny young man and didn't have the distinctive aura that high-level hunters usually carried, the agent wasn't naive enough to be fooled by that guise.

The agent's heart was pounding painfully in his chest. Noctus's current experiment was his true passion, and it had drawn much attention within the syndicate. Allowing a single hunter to thwart this highly anticipated experiment would surely result in harsh retribution from the powers that ruled Akashic Tower.

The silence in the room was deafening. The agent stood completely still and focused on his senses. With thoughts of the Thousand Tricks tracking him down and breaking into this very room

at any second, he was nearly overcome by a strange fear.

Suddenly, the door opened. It wasn't preceded by any footstep sounds.

The agent leaped to his feet and, out of instinct, drew his dagger.

What would this dagger do against a Level 8 freak? It isn't even enchanted, whispered his last shred of sanity to him. But all the same, he had no other weapon on him. He could only stand there trembling, at the brink of collapse.

"I've just returned at my master's orders," a voice called to him as a figure entered through the door. "What's the matter?"

Much to his surprise, the agent recognized the voice. "You're...!"

"Oh, here's a souvenir for you," said the voice, completely relaxed.

The voice belonged to a teenage girl with eyes the color of deep crimson flames. Her hair of the same hue draped voluminously down to her waist. On her was a black, long-sleeved robe that covered most of her skin. While her current attire was far from fashionable, her unblemished skin and picturesque face gave a glimpse of how much attention she would've drawn if she ever decided to dress like a normal teenager.

The agent knew that the girl was not a pretty but inexperienced Magus like she appeared to be. In fact, she was Noctus Cochlear's best apprentice, a Mad Magus whom Noctus himself had called "a slave to truth-seeking."

"Sophia, y-you're back!" said the agent hoarsely.

Sophia Black had displayed her excellent talents in all manners of research, had invented countless weapons, and had overcome hurdle after hurdle in her life. And now, she was looking at the agent with confusion.

By the time Liz and I returned to the clan house, the sun had long set. As expected, we'd found no trace of the Sitri Slime; I'd even interviewed some people to no avail. People disappeared all the time in the decaying district, and so I was forced to conclude that Eva's tip had nothing to do with the missing slime. But just in case, I had Liz look out for it. If even the keenest set of senses the Grievors had to offer couldn't find it, it definitely wasn't in the district.

Liz crooked her neck with an uncharacteristic feebleness and said, "Hmm, maybe I'm in need of a tune-up."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You didn't mess up or anything. I was overthinking it."

Liz was always full of energy and quick to throw punches. Yet, she put too much stock in my expectations for her, which I was sure had

affected how she trained Tino. Her trust in me was probably far greater than what a normal party leader would garner from their members.

This was precisely why I couldn't make rash decisions: well, to be more accurate, I needed to acknowledge my rash decisions when I did make them. And this meant I must admit that I did need Sitri's help after all.

Sitri, our talented Alchemist, was Liz's sister, but despite their similar looks, their personalities couldn't have been more different. Sitri was a composed, studious, and adroit person who could take on any challenge flawlessly. Her level was technically the lowest among all Grievors due to a tragic circumstance, but her abilities were in no way inferior to those of any other member. While Liz had the upper hand in the department of physical abilities, Sitri's expansive and diverse knowledge base put the rest of us to shame.

Anyway, the Sitri Slime was her creation. With her knowledge and experience, she would surely have figured out, based on its nature, how the slime had escaped its metal capsule and gone missing, as well as where it was now. Even if Sitri had neglected to put the slime in the capsule before giving it to me, I'd still have to ask her for the current whereabouts of the slime either way.

The only question was, "When would she return from Night Palace?" A week had passed since Liz's solo return to the capital. And since, apparently, Liz had left after the party had reached a boss room, I had expected the rest of the Grievors to return soon.

"Do you know when Sitri's coming back?" I asked.

"What's wrong, Krai Baby?" said Liz, blinking at me. "What do you want with Siddy?"

The capital was safe and sound for the time being, but I wanted some guarantee that this would last a little longer. If the capital were to be hit with a great disaster and brought to ruins, I'd be long gone from the place before even considering any other option. But knowing that *I* was the cause, I would reconsider that.

"I have no idea," answered Liz. "But if it's something I can help you with, I'll do *anything* for you."

"I'm not sure about the details yet so I won't tell you, but I need to know something about a magical creature," I said.

Crossing her arms in front of her modestly sized chest, Liz frowned. "Oh yeah, you might need Siddy for that."

As much as Liz was a meathead, she was a *self-aware* meathead.

Since I was seeking answers regarding Sitri's own creation—and she hadn't told me any details about it—asking *any* other expert on magical creatures would've been useless. Honestly, I'd been too scared to ask Sitri more about the slime, knowing that whatever she had to

say about it would just make me more afraid to keep it anywhere near me. But to be fair, I didn't expect to lose the thing. I just couldn't get it off my mind, but I know showing concern for it 24/7 would only sow seeds of anxiety within the clan.

I sank deep into my clan master's chair, trying my best to maintain my calm and cool facade. A week had already gone by, and if the city wasn't destroyed by now, the chance that it was ever going to be was slim after all.

"Sitri'll be back soon enough," I said.

"Well," said Liz, "she was excited about going to a Level 8 vault and all the new stuff it offers. She might be there for a while; she did bring along all sorts of weird equipment after all. Not that I think they'd stay too long without me though."

Sitri could be obsessive: plenty of our previous quests had been extended thanks to her curiosity. Yet whenever that happened, the other members were all too happy to prolong their trips as well—what a disciplined party I was in.

Starting to feel a bit nervous, I cleared my throat. I would've picked a Relic to polish to calm myself, but they'd all been polished perfectly already. "It's okay," I told myself. "She'll be back soon... Soon..."

Then, the office door opened suddenly.

Eva walked in briskly, gave a glance to Liz who was lounging on the sofa, and turned to me without a word. Despite Liz's combative nature, she'd never messed with Eva because I'd told her over and over and over again not to mess with my brilliant vice clan master; if she scared Eva away, this clan would cease to function.

Liz gave a lazy wave and said, "Aloha, Eva."

"Aloha!" replied Eva, then quickly turned towards me. "Krai, I've selected members from the clan to aid in the investigation of White Wolf's Den. If you would like to amend the selection in any way—"

"Oh, thank you! I'll leave that to you. Ark's not here anyway," I said.

"Gark came in this afternoon, and I negotiated in your stead. He did seem rather concerned with your absence," said Eva.

There wasn't much I could've done at the meeting, anyway, other than maybe interjecting a couple well-timed "uh-huhs." I'd trust Eva's call over mine any day. Unlike other clans where clan masters held their positions because they were good at their jobs, our clan had Eva, who was far better at every aspect of clan management than I was. But wasn't it worth something that I was at least self-aware of how useless I was?

"Like usual, I'll leave the basics to you. You can come talk to me whenever you need to, and I'll check in if I need anything," I told her

with admittedly slender heart. "I really appreciate your help."

"No. I know I can't help with what's really important," said Eva without batting an eye.

What is she talking about? She didn't look like she was joking, but her statement made no sense either. Maybe she was telling me to do my job sarcastically. Her wit was wasted on me if that was her intention.

"This clan can't run without you." And I added, "Seriously."

Undeniably, Eva had done so much work for me.

"Was my information useful? You don't usually leave the clan house during the day," she said.

I was sure that gathering intel on the decaying district required its own kind of finesse. But unfortunately, I wasn't even able to verify the rumors about the uptick in missing children. So was her information useful? Sadly not really. But I wasn't going to shoot Eva down when she'd already done everything to answer my whim. But then neither could I lie; Eva would see right through me, and Liz was right here in the room.

So, with (what hopefully sounded like) gravitas, I closed my eyes and answered, "I didn't find what I was looking for, but that doesn't mean I didn't gain anything."

Knowing that the decaying district had nothing out of sorts alone was enough for me. But Eva gave me a quizzical look instead. Maybe I was being too obvious in avoiding a straight answer.

And so I rushed to add, jokingly, "Oh, right. I went to the ice cream shop you told me about, but it was closed."

"I-Is that so?" said Eva. "I thought they were open every day of the week."

"They had their shutters down. It was a shame. Maybe they had an emergency," I said.

It was a bit daunting to think that I'd have to make my way back there on another day. Maybe I'd take Tino with me next time.

With her chin on the armrest of the couch, Liz kicked her feet up and down. "I could smell it when we got there, and I could hear people inside. They must've been open until just before we got there. Krai Baby took time out of his busy day to go. So rude of them."

It was quite the ordeal to stop Liz from pounding on the shutters and trying to break into the place. She didn't like ice cream at all, so that was all for my benefit. Although what really would benefit me would be for her to stop doing things like that.

Eva cleared her throat and said, "As you may know already, the investigation of White Wolf's Den will commence in the next few days. The recruited experts will comb through the entire vault, I was told."

That sounded like the Association was making a pretty big deal

out of it. I wondered how many of our members had Eva signed up for the mission. Not that it affected me in any way though; it wasn't me going in there again anyway. In fact, I wanted to pat myself on the back for making it out of that place alive after charging into there alone.

Pinching her brows at me, Eva said, "Is anything wrong?"

"What? Not really. Our members can handle themselves.

Whatever's going on down there, I'm sure is fine. It was only a Level 3 vault to begin with after all."

Besides, things were different from when I'd blindly sent in Tino's team. Now everyone knew something was wrong with White Wolf's Den. With proper preparations, most phantoms shouldn't be a problem.

And still, Eva looked at me doubtfully. *What was she so concerned about?*

In an Akashic Tower base of operations at a safe distance from the decaying district, Noctus had gathered nearly his entire research team: his apprentices, informants tasked with gathering intel throughout the capital and communicating with the headquarters, and bodyguards. Due to the secretive nature of the syndicate, this was the first time that so many members of his team had congregated in one place. Each of their faces was underscored with the severity of the situation, and their eyes were focused on a female Magus, Sophia Black, who'd just returned to base.

Flick Petosin, Noctus's second apprentice, glowered at her. "It's about time," he snarled. "Where have you been while we dealt with this crisis without you?"

Sophia sheepishly said, "I'm sorry. I had to travel rather far to gather ingredients for an experiment."

Her apology didn't improve Flick's disdain one bit. His eyes still shone with contempt and envy for an inferior Magus whom his master favored over him. In truth, Sophia was noticeably less adept at spell casting than the other apprentices; if she were to challenge any of them in a magic duel, she wouldn't stand a chance. All Magi took pride in their spell-casting prowess, and Flick couldn't stand that Sophia had been appointed as the first apprentice despite her inferior magic abilities.

If only Sophia had been better practiced at magic, she would've garnered more respect from her fellow apprentices. However, there was a good reason Noctus had chosen her as his first apprentice over the others.

Noctus and his team had been backed into a corner. He'd called

this meeting including everyone precisely because the decision they'd make would have direct effects on their plan. Not only had their experiment been brought to light, but both the Association and the empire had also each launched an investigation.

And to add insult to injury, the Thousand Tricks had located at least one of their bases. In addition to a large amount of time and money, Noctus's project required a location that met specific parameters. Noctus's experiment had only just gotten off the ground, but even if they were to abandon their lab underneath White Wolf's Den and relocate the results they'd achieved so far, their research would be significantly delayed by their scout for a new location in another country.

But on the other hand, if the empire were to capture them and seize their lab results, the damage would be irreparable. Anyone arrested for these crimes would hang on the gallows without question, and the empire would reinforce security to prevent Noctus or any surviving members from ever experimenting within the empire again. A bust like that would most likely hurt the syndicate at large too. Noctus, driven only by his unending ambition for the truth, had no sense of obligation towards the organization that had given him a place following his exile from the world of proper academia as a result of his dealing with a taboo subject matter. But still, he didn't like his chances against a superpower like the empire. Now he faced a fork in the road ahead: retreat or fight until the bitter end.

The biggest monkey wrench thrown into his plan was none other than the Thousand Tricks. Noctus could deal with both the Association and the empire when the only lead they had was the changes in White Wolf's Den; they'd never uncover Noctus nor his team on that alone. Had that been the case, they'd only have to abandon, or simply pause, their experiment below the vault until the dust settled. The changes they'd triggered in the vault were only temporary, so White Wolf's Den would revert to its normal state after some time. Then neither the Association nor the empire would suspect anything more than a fluky phenomenon—as long as no one was wiser than that and suspected otherwise. With the Thousand Tricks privy to their existence, Noctus knew the Level 8 hunter would prove to be a significant roadblock to their plan.

How much does he know? How did he find out about us? Furthermore, why has he not come after us yet?

These worries had kept Noctus from making a decision.

Back in the days before Noctus's fame had turned to notoriety, he'd looked down on treasure hunters. They'd been rowdy thugs who thought they ruled the world, drunk on the power given to them by mana material. They'd been lowlifes who lived only to serve their own

wants without so much as an inclination to uncover the underlying principles of the energy that gave them their strength in the first place.

But now Noctus had a new perspective on them. After taking in a substantial amount of mana material during his experiment below a vault, he had come to realize just how powerful a force mana material could be—enough to warrant the egotistical behavior of hunters bolstered by it. Feeling how powerful he'd been made by just the relatively thin flow of mana material in White Wolf's Den, Noctus could hardly imagine how much power the Grievors must've gained through their conquests of treasure vaults far more dangerous than White Wolf's Den.

Noctus had absolute confidence in his spell-casting abilities, but he wasn't foolhardy; he couldn't be sure if he could win a fair fight against the Thousand Tricks. His apprentices seemed to share the same sentiment, as none of them called for the team to fight the hunter. In fact, most of them were leaning towards the "flight" option.

Having been relayed the events that had transpired in her absence, Sophia, completely unfazed, closed her eyes and pondered for some moments. But just as the other apprentices were about to break the silence, she opened her bloodred eyes.

"Let's fight. It must be so," she declared with quiet confidence.

Flick slammed the desk before him. "So-Sophia! We're talking about a *Level 8*! Tell me you have a plan!"

The team had already conducted an extensive investigation on the Thousand Tricks but hadn't found any information on his *modus operandi*. While, of course, other agents of the empire and the Association would also cause them enough problems, the "unknown" was both sought after and feared by Magi.

Sophia curled her lips in an almost diffident smile and said, "What's the matter, Flick? We're truth-seekers who operate beyond the confines of the laws of humans. There's no reason to back down."

Upon hearing her words, Flick, a man a decade her senior, took a step back as if he was intimidated by her look. And none of the other apprentices protested—not because they agreed with Sophia, but because they were silenced by the imperious aura about her.



Her unyielding determination was the very quality that had earned Sophia her place as Noctus's first apprentice. She was a zealot for the astral god—the manifestation of the universal truth—which meant that morals, laws, and the opinions of others (including her master) had absolutely no bearing on her actions.

To Noctus, she was the most troublesome but also promising apprentice; she was a truly fitting member of Akashic Tower.

Sophia, putting her hands together, turned to Noctus and proposed her brilliant idea, "I know. But the incoming investigation party is full of high-level hunters—the perfect test subjects for our defense system. We could even stop the information from spreading further if we wipe them all out. What do you think, Master?"

Noctus squinted in scrutiny.

Sophia was treating the hunters the Tower had been dreading as mere test subjects. There was no trepidation in her eyes; defeat hadn't even crossed her mind. She even looked like she was enjoying the prospect of facing the hunters.

And the look in her eyes pushed Noctus to make up his mind.

"Very well. Pull out all the stops."

Now that the Thousand Tricks was on the scent of their team, Noctus knew Akashic Tower wouldn't emerge from this unscathed; his only out would be to eliminate the entire investigation party. Only once the Tower defeated the empire's and the Association's agents would the Master of Magi's life's work come to fruition.

"Take the lead, Sophia," commanded Noctus. "Use any resource necessary, and bring me their heads on stakes."

Teary-eyed, Sophia beheld her master. "You can count on me, Master. Thank you for this opportunity."

The other apprentices watched silently, stewing in fear and jealousy.

Her entire body felt like it was on fire.

As Tino awakened, every fiber in her body began throbbing with a dull ache. She groaned softly as she twisted in her soft bed. But that did nothing to ease her agony. She poked her head out from under her bedspread, and she found herself in her undecorated room in a building close to the clan house.

"If you can't do it in training, you can't do it in real life, can you?" is what her mentor would always say.

Tino was subjected to literal torture every time she sparred against her mentor, who claimed to have been acclimating Tino to the boundless power that was only unlocked on the brink of death. Tino

had survived quite a few of these “realistic” training sessions by this point, but there was no sign of them getting any easier.

Her body screamed in pain under her expressionless facade as Tino managed to sit up in her bed, and she saw a girl with frumpy hair staring back grumpily from within the full-length mirror—without any clothes on.

Perhaps Lizzy had carried the unconscious me from the near-death experience, stripped me of my dirt-stained clothes, hosed me down, and tossed me into my bed.

Previously, her mentor would’ve simply left Tino at the training grounds after these training sessions of theirs. But ever since Master Krai had had a word with her mentor about her subhuman treatment of her apprentice, she had made sure Tino had at least made it back to her room. Her mentor might not exactly be tucking her in caringly, but Tino much preferred that to being left out on display in front of her clanmates for hours on end.

Tino saw no scars on her own porcelain skin, which looked almost too unblemished for someone who fought monsters for a living. This meant either her body had healed itself while she’d been out cold, she’d been dunked into a vat of potion, or her mentor (who definitely didn’t know how to pull punches) had devised a new technique to damage the human body without leaving any marks. But in any case, Tino was thankful for the absence of scars; she knew that her pain and exhaustion would soon fade too—Tino had taken in enough mana material to allow for that.

She wobbled her way to the bathroom where she stood under a cold shower to awaken her senses. As Tino enjoyed the sensation of icy water quelling her pain, she assessed her physical condition. A treasure hunter had to take good care of their body, especially when they had a mentor who subjected them to training with no regard for their safety.

Brushing her arms and shoulders as water streamed down them, Tino muttered to herself, “Lizzy really knows what she’s doing. There’s not even a single bruise.”

While her mentor had used no weapon, she hadn’t hesitated to go after and kick Tino’s joints. Brute strength wasn’t a Thief’s forte, but, still, each of her mentor’s strikes had been heavy enough that Tino couldn’t have blocked them without sustaining any damage; a single imperfect parry could’ve proven fatal to Tino. She was sure that a few of her bones had been broken last night, and it was a small wonder that she saw no evidence of internal bleeding now.

Though, her memory of the training session was still hazy, probably because she’d drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the training session. She must’ve done well though; she must’ve stared

death in the face and still managed to parry her mentor's attacks. Or otherwise, she would've never woken up.

There were plenty of places in the capital where a hunter could train in combat, many of them heralded by renowned ex-hunters in their retirement; there were formal schools too. In fact, most hunters Level 3 or higher had received some kind of formal training. Tino wondered how many of them faced training as brutal as hers: spewing blood and eating dirt, and all the while withstanding what felt like genuine murderous intents from her mentor.

It had been Tino's own decision to seek out Liz Smart's tutelage. Liz had refused at first, claiming she didn't have time for it, but Tino had secured the apprenticeship out of sheer good luck. Master had happened to be there when she'd pleaded her case with Liz, and he had convinced Liz to change her mind. Without Master, Tino wouldn't be a treasure hunter today.

Tino had often been told that she was strong and that she'd trained hard and well for her age. But, sometimes, she'd also been envied by other hunters. But before she'd known it, she'd always expected to fight on the brink of death. But despite the nearly fatal and torturous methods, Tino had no intention of leaving her mentor. She often felt a powerful urge to give up, but she hadn't. Yet.

Am I living up to my mentor's expectations? The thought gave her a chill, and she shakily turned off the shower.

After getting dressed, Tino headed back to the clan house. Her rental room was a ten-minute walk from the clan house, and it was for that very reason she'd picked the place. With First Steps's clan house being much taller than its surrounding buildings, Tino could see its roof from her room if she poked her head out the window. According to her mentor, she could even see the insides of the clan master's office on the highest floor of the clan house, but Tino's eyesight had failed her in this regard.

Tino considered herself less than a full-fledged hunter. While she'd earned the above-average Level 4 and had seen her fair share of treasure vaults, she had yet to earn her mentor's approval. And that was the reason Tino stayed mostly in the capital and refused to form a proper party despite the Association's recommendation to do so—she considered herself to be still in training.

Tino's entire life revolved around her training. But since Liz was an active hunter on top of being her mentor, there was precious little time for Tino to receive proper training from her fickle and free-spirited "Lizzy." It wasn't uncommon for her mentor to vanish without leaving so much as a message for Tino, and so Tino strove to spend as much time as possible in her mentor's proximity when she knew her mentor would be in town.

Arriving at the clan house, Tino saw a rare sight: several large carriages were parked in front of the building. The steel wagons resembled tanks in their plainness, suggesting that they weren't from any noble house. And strapped to the wagons were horses, stomping impatiently, bred specifically to traverse dangerous landscapes teeming with monsters and phantoms.

Watching the horses without thinking much of them, Tino walked into the lobby to find dozens of hunters congregating there. The hunters varied in class, getup, and level; the only thing they had in common was that they all belonged to First Steps. Tino frowned at the crowd of hunters, armed as if they were readying for war.

Why so many of them? A big quest?

First Steps was one of the more populous clans in the capital, but it was rare for a large group of its members to gather like this.

Tino, as an original member of the clan, was acquainted with just about every member.

"What's going on?" she asked a nearby Swordsman.

"Oh, Tino, haven't you heard? We've been summoned. It's a joint effort with the Association, a government gig. We're going into White Wolf's Den," he answered.

Noting the all-too-familiar vault name, she looked around the lobby again. "All of you are?"

A gathering of this many members was unprecedented. The hunters composed quite an impressive lineup, with their head count amounting to about half of the entire registry of the clan. Considering that some members were working outside the capital, Tino wondered if most members in town had been summoned. Tino had heard of an investigation in the works, but this was not the scale of one—this looked more like they were planning to exterminate all monsters in the vault.

The enemies in White Wolf's Den were formidable, but the members of First Steps were elite hunters, with plenty of them being Level 4 or higher. Hence, Tino couldn't imagine how much more trouble had been brewing in the vault to warrant this level of reaction, especially when the boss had already been taken care of. Although the boss could respawn once enough mana material had accumulated, it'd take a long time before such a powerful phantom would reappear.

Seeing the incredulous look on Tino, the Swordsman dramatically whispered, "Between you and me, I've heard that the CM wanted to send Ark."

"What?" Tino stared unblinkingly at the man. *What is he saying?* But the punch line never came.

He twisted his lips into a grin and chuckled. "What a joke, right? Sending one of our top hunters to look into a Level 3 vault. But Ark

isn't here, so *we're* taking his place."

Now Tino understood why the hunters seemed on edge.

Ark Rodin was one of the best-known hunters of the capital. He must've been a man blessed by all the gods and preordained to become a hero. He was also a master of various magic and techniques; it'd been said that his sword would tear the world asunder like a thousand lightning bolts. As such, he'd garnered passionate support from both the higher-ups of the empire and members of First Steps; he was also sort of a rival to Tino's mentor and her fellow Grievors.

Investigating a Level 3 treasure vault was definitely below Ark. Sending him seemed like a disproportionate reaction; this move would be against the Association's recommendation that hunters stick to vaults on par with their level. If high-level hunters looted all the low-level vaults and cleared their phantoms and Relics, that would leave lower-level hunters without opportunities to improve. Additionally, higher-level hunters could even be unavailable in times of need had this been the case.

But naturally, the calculating Master had to be well aware of that. That meant whatever was happening in White Wolf's Den was so dire that it required the likes of Ark Rodin. Tino, a mere mortal, couldn't imagine what that could possibly be. If she'd been among the hunters summoned for this job, she might've written her will, looking just as tense as they were.

Wait. If Lizzy sees me now, she could throw me into the mix.

"This is *all* of you?" she asked, suppressing her fear.

"Hey. 'Give us some credit' is what I *would* say..." replied the Swordsman, scratching his head.

Ark Rodin was undeniably one of the strongest hunters out there; mastering either the sword or magic to the caliber he had would've earned anyone a spot among the top-tier hunters. But not only was Ark a master of both, but he also used them seamlessly in battle. Even Tino's master, who considered herself among the strongest hunters in the world, couldn't deny Ark's prowess. If the other members of Ark Brave had even seventy percent of Ark's talent, they could've secured the title of "the strongest party of their generation."

Can all these hunters really make up for Ark's absence? wondered Tino.

The Swordsman grinned with a powerful spirit but also a hint of fear. "With this many of us, we'll manage. I've heard parties from other clans are joining too—"

The crowd stirred. A young man came sauntering down the staircase, and the crowd focused their eyes on him. The clairvoyant Thousand Tricks was descending the stairs. Alongside him was his vice clan master, coldly observing the congregated hunters. There, a hush

came over the crowd as the members waited for their clan master to speak.

Master, sticking out like a sore thumb with his casual getup among the fully armed hunters, said absentmindedly, "Huh? What are you guys doing here? What's the big event?"

"For what we discussed yesterday," said Eva.

"Oh. *That*," he said. "But there're so many of them."

"I know you requested Ark, but he is unavailable at the moment. So I called for them instead. By my calculation, they collectively make a comparable substitution."

Master stared at the crowd, wide-eyed.

Many nonhunters didn't quite grasp how powerful hunters are. And because of that, every year, there'd be some nonhunters who'd set out for treasure vaults and never return. They thought if hunters could handle the vaults, they, being human too, could handle one as well—these were avoidable tragedies caused by ignorance. While Eva wasn't a hunter herself, everyone in the clan respected her as a manager of their organization who knew a lot about the members of First Steps, second only to Master himself. The fact that no one in the crowd refuted her claim showed that Eva's calculation was accurate.

Master, however, didn't look convinced. "What? Oh... Uh-huh. Right... This many?"

"If something is not to your liking, please let me know," said Eva.

The lobby fell pin-drop silent. Everyone in the clan knew how exceptionally powerful Ark was; the only ones who dared claim their superiority over him were the Grievors.

Master, with his neck tilted, observed the crowd for a few moments before hesitantly venturing a smile. "Well, our hunters are pretty good. Perhaps just half of them will do."

"What?! *Half*?! There's no way!" said a hunter in the crowd.

"This situation called for Ark, right?! I'm not convinced even the sum of all of us could fill his shoes!" said another.

How did this happen? I wondered.

I couldn't conceal my dismay as the crowd of hunters erupted in protest. Eva was staring at me like I was stupid or something, but I didn't think my comment was unwarranted, was it? Not to toot my own horn, but First Steps was one of the most robust clans in the capital; our members were much stronger than average.

There were two things I'd wanted to accomplish when I'd started this clan: one, to use my position as clan master as an excuse to stay away from the dangers of treasure vaults; and two, to make connections with other parties in order to *socialize* the Grievors.

Having exceptional talent could be lonely at times: it kept most of the talentless at arm's length. While the other Grievors weren't all too lonely because they had each other, I felt like that only accentuated our lack of interaction with other parties. That was why I'd chosen parties to help based on age and skill when I'd been starting up the clan; I'd bet that the Grievors would accept them if they were close in age and could keep up with them in the field. I wanted to give the Grievors (mostly Luke and Liz) some social interaction and eventually take in someone to replace my place in Grieving Souls so I wouldn't be holding them back.

With faint expectations, I'd contacted all the famous parties in the capital at the time: First, there had been Obsidian Cross, whose members had conquered many high-level vaults with minimal casualty thanks to them all having healing abilities. Then, there had been Starlight, whose multiple powerful Magi were unrivaled in their abilities to devastate large areas with magic. Next, there had been Knights of the Torch, whose members had attained high levels of abilities with their great discipline and rigor in training. And above all, there had been Ark Brave, whose members rivaled the Grievors and whose leader was the undisputed hero Ark Rodin. By the way, although it'd been the other Grievors who'd handled the negotiations, the process had gone surprisingly well.

To this day, I still hadn't accomplished my original goals entirely, but I'd made decent progress: I was away from the front lines, and the Grievors were better off than they would've been had I not set up the clan, I'd like to think.

With all that in mind, the members of such a clan were, of course, very talented, and it looked like they'd provided a healthy sense of competition for each other. Even as I stopped being so picky about clan members as time went on, First Steps had still maintained its reputation as an elite clan on the rise—everyone in the lobby now was definitely above average.

Ark was on another level, sure, but I only liked assigning him these things because he was *the* safe bet, and I felt the least nervous asking him for favors; it wasn't like I thought no one else could do this job. If our hunters here only thought about it for a moment, they'd realize that a situation where I *had* to have Ark would be a terrifying disaster—I couldn't even imagine what kind of pickle we'd be in then.

I gave Eva a look. *She doesn't have to go this extreme...* When I'd told Gark that I'd do anything to help him, I'd been mostly just being polite. How had she gotten this many people on such short notice? Of course, I already knew how amazing Eva was, but there was one burning concern in my mind, *How much would sending all these hunters cost?* Hunters had to be paid after all. I *did* pledge my full support to

Gark, but my wallet was also nearly empty.

Eva nodded gravely and called to the lobby, “Quiet please. Krai has something to say.”

All of them hushed immediately and looked at me again.

I cleared my throat in an attempt to diffuse the stinging looks and the silence. *Wow. Who’s this “Krai” who has something to say? I mean, I can say something...*

After choosing my words for a few moments, I put on a smile to mask my internal panic and said, “Calm down, calm down. Think about it for a second. The treasure vault you’re going to used to be Level 3—don’t sweat it so much.”

“Lies!” shouted a Magus in a black robe at the front of the crowd.

Hunters who were far stronger than me were looking at me with horror in their eyes.

I’m not lying. I’ve never lied in my life.

“Branch Manager Gark is getting other parties on the team too,” I reassured. “It won’t be all on our shoulders. White Wolf’s Den is indeed more dangerous than normal, so I understand where this anxiety’s coming from, but please...”

Hunters weren’t supposed to trample through treasure vaults with overwhelming force. We’re supposed to be adventurers.

Zero trust.

Even Tino was looking at me like I was a liar. Despite my very logically sound reassurance, the crowd didn’t look reassured at all.

Well, I’ve just sent her to White Wolf’s Den before I knew about all of this. But I still think I’m correct here.

I looked around the room again, but the hunters were all avoiding my eyes. I’d been away from the front lines for a while; maybe I was overly optimistic. The way they were vehemently rejecting my input made me start to feel so. And I never had much confidence in myself anyway.

“What do you think?” I quietly asked Eva.

“With a situation as dire as this, I think we should leave some wiggle room.”

“Hmm...”

It sounded like Eva agreed with the other members.

I gave one more look at the group and saw that, although they were large in number, our top-tier hunters weren’t among them. Ark, of course, wasn’t there, but I also couldn’t find any Obsidian Cross or Starlight members either; this wasn’t unusual considering how busy our top talents were. Still, I couldn’t help but think that this was overkill. If all of them went down to White Wolf’s Den in full force, the place would be annihilated.

“What if we took out a few parties?” I suggested.

Even if we could afford to pay them, if we let all First Steps hunters go at once, there'd be no one left at the clan house to do things for me.

Not that I could admit to how pathetic I was...

Then, one of the hunters barked, "CM! We're not asking for *more* hunters! What's the problem with sending the ones here?"

"Well..." I stuttered.

"And we may be clanmates, but we're not in your party—we're not obligated to follow your orders. If there's a *legitimate* reason you can't send all of us, tell us!"

"Well, you have a point," I said.

Some hunters behind him were also nodding in agreement.

What are they so scared of that they adamantly refuse to take a few parties out?

So I considered the matter again: while I'd pledged our support to Gark out of politeness, I hadn't offered to do it for free. But as a clan that emphasized individual freedom, the decision to accept or deny a particular quest was usually left up to each hunter and party. As clan master, I should clear this up.

"Are they going to cover the pay for everyone here, Eva?" I asked. "They don't have an unlimited budget, do they? I don't think they could afford all of them."

This quest came from the government, and they predetermine budgets according to the expected difficulties of quests. While what was going on in White Wolf's Den was highly unusual, I didn't think it warranted a budget that could pay for half of our clan.

Eva coolly answered, "They've no problem paying. Gark pulled an extra budget. I've double-checked with him, and it's an appropriate rate."

"Really? How did he pull that off?" I asked.

The empire wasn't stingy by any means, but Gark would have had to present some kind of evidence to demand an increase to the proposed budget. *I wonder if the first investigation party brought something back.* Gark didn't seem like he had any new information when I last spoke to him, but it was possible that he had gained new intel while I was out in the town with Liz. If that new intel was something foreboding, I could understand why my elite clan members were so nervous about downsizing their massive party; that seemed more likely the more I thought about it. I felt like I'd just solved the last piece of the puzzle.

Secretly, I was relieved.

Good thing my clan members didn't take my word for anything; I was about to make the same mistake I'd made when I sent Tino's party. Not that I would've done anything about it, but I would've liked to be informed

of this new development though... And I did delegate this whole thing to Eva anyway.

I looked at Eva, and she gave me a quick nod. “He used the information you gave him.”

“Huh.”

What in the world is she talking about? Lost for words, I returned what must’ve looked like a knowing nod. Could Eva’ve been talking to someone else in the room? Someone with that kind of useful information?

When did I mention anything like that?

I tried to recall everything I’d told Gark, which was (to paraphrase), “I don’t know anything, but I will help.” I mentioned to Eva I would’ve sent Ark if he was around, but that was it. I couldn’t figure out how he could’ve used my words in his negotiation with the empire when I hadn’t even mentioned anything specific to what was going on in the vault.

I shouldn’t have agreed to help. I didn’t have to. I could’ve just said I was busy doing something else or something... It was too late now though. I was going to barf. *Is it going to be my fault if nothing comes of this White Wolf’s Den fiasco?* I put my hand on my forehead and spiraled into self-hatred. *Why do I have to talk? Ever? This is what happens when I say things without thinking.*

On the other hand, the officer at the Association should take most of the blame for misconstruing my words. But regardless, I had to decide on my next move. Now that Gark had pulled extra money from the empire to deal with this, I doubted that even my one and only talent—my expert kowtowing skills—could get me out of this one.

Presently, all eyes in the lobby were piercing me like daggers with their grim looks. I was out of excuses to downsize the party; and besides, now that the funding had been secured, Gark would just hire parties from other clans to make up for any downsizing I’d do from our side. It looked like I was out of options. I stood there grunting for a while until I decided to give up.

“Whatever,” I said.

“What?!” responded the crowd.

At the end of the day, *I* didn’t say anything to blow this out of proportion. I’d only told Gark that I would help him. It was *he* who’d gone ahead and got the extra funding, so Gark could handle it all if he got any heat from the empire. And if any heat ever came in my direction, I’d expertly play dumb about it. That was my *other* one and only talent.

“What? Are you sure we can all go, CM?”

“If that’s what you want to do, who am I to stop you?” I said.

Who cares? Go nuts.

The crowd was *still* looking at me weirdly somehow now that I'd decided to not care about it at all.

But don't come grumbling to me when the quest turns out to be a walk in the park. I tried to downsize the team, but you lot won't let me!

"What a load of crap. If you idiots want to flock together so badly—quit. Hunting." A voice that I *really* didn't want to hear at this moment came from behind me.

The group of hunters tensed up. There were no footsteps, but I soon felt a soft embrace on my back and a pair of slender arms around my waist.

"Liz, you shouldn't say things like you're mocking them," I said.

Having just been on a date with me, Liz sounded more cheerful than usual. I couldn't see her, but I was sure she had a grin on her face.

Meanwhile, Tino inconspicuously hid behind a tall hunter standing beside her.

"Like? I *am* mocking them. I don't even feel like getting mad. How can I?" she went on in a sickly sweet tone, as if speaking to a room full of children. But even so, her voice seemed to inspire as much fear as she did as if she was yelling. "You do have impossibly high expectations, Krai Baby, but how can you call yourself a hunter if you're too chicken to face death? I'd never say no to you."

Wait a minute. "Impossibly high"? Really? I couldn't believe my ears. Liz, while a hopeful meathead, was a top-notch hunter. If even *she* thought my expectations were high, it meant that I was completely misjudging the situation.

"They're not high," I muttered in quiet protest.

And Liz held me a little tighter.

"That's because...you're powerful, Stifled Shadow," said one of the hunters.

Liz scoffed, "No wonder Krai Baby's giving up on you. This is why you're never getting any stronger. Do you really wanna take the easy way out that badly?"

When did I give up on them, exactly?

I was pretty satisfied with how First Steps was. I'd been wondering what they'd been so afraid of, but now that Liz said I had high expectations, their reaction made sense. Being careful was a good thing! I quit treasure hunting exactly because I didn't want to die.

"Oh, well. Whatever," said Liz. "I don't care about you. Actually, I'm glad you don't want to take it." And with all eyes on her, Liz crooned to me, "T and I will be taking this quest, Krai Baby. You don't mind, do you? I thought the phantoms in White Wolf's Den and all their weapons were perfect for her training. I don't need anyone else."

The elite hunters in the lobby, understandably, expressed their

confusion at Liz's claim.

And on the other hand, Tino let out a pathetic cry. She'd had some major bad luck lately.

"But...a quest that you needed Ark for will be dangerous for T, so I want a—" Liz walked in front of me and swirled her finger on my chest. "You know, Anssy isn't here, and we don't have a healer; I can't fix T if she loses a limb or organ." She whispered into my ear, "You have one on you, don't you, Krai Baby? A high elixir? Pretty please?"

She wants Tino to keep fighting even if Tino loses a limb...

Tino was quivering like a beaten puppy.

And with a smile, I told Liz, "No."

"What?! Why not?!"

Because you can't play nice with others.

Not a chance I was letting her go when there were already other hunters at White Wolf's Den. Brute strength wasn't the only consideration here—as much as I'd like to socialize Liz, she'd just gotten to the point where she'd *almost* kill any hunter she got into a fight with—she'd be a bigger threat than all the phantoms in the vault combined. Besides, I was starting to feel bad for Tino.

I patted Liz's arm to quell her boo and turned to the hunters in the room. "Our situation has changed. I take back my words on cutting people from this party. I want everyone here, just as Eva has chosen, to go to White Wolf's Den. I know the vault isn't that high-leveled, but don't let your guard down until the job's done."

Now that I flip-flopped on my opinion, they were sharing looks with each other like they were trying to make out what I'd said. And for some reason, there were a few of them chattering their teeth.

I'll have to have Liz tell me later which part about this quest made it seem like I have "impossibly high" expectations.

Then suddenly, Eva timidly dropped this bombshell on me, "Krai...if you don't mind, can you take charge of this quest?"

"Huh?"

Time stood still a moment before it returned to normal as the hunters began talking again.

Staring at me was Liz, bewildered.

"No, no, no, no, no. It doesn't have to come to that," I said.

"But the only one who could compare to Ark, especially levelwise, is you. It'll also be an effective gesture to the Association," countered Eva.

I broke out in a cold sweat at Eva's words, which I couldn't tell if they were meant to mess with me or not.

I'm weak. Remember?

And it wasn't like I had any leadership skills to make up for that either. I'd only gained my position being carried on the backs of my

friends, and I was fully aware of how useless I was. I couldn't judge the skill sets of others, and I still struggled to match names to some of these faces in the room. Even Liz would be a better leader than me, especially since I'd been away from exploring treasure vaults properly for so long.

Besides, who'd want to follow my lead, anyway, when I haven't produced any tangible results in the past five years?

"I see. Good thinking, VCM. You do know this clan like the back of your hand," said one of the hunters.

"If our Level 8 CM has our back, there's nothing to worry about."

"Phantoms are specks of dust before you, Master! I'll go if you go!"

Everyone seemed confident about this quest all of a sudden.

How could they be so reckless as to trust me with their lives?

Eva was giving me her icy look again; I guess she was telling me to do my job for once. This was cruel and inhumane though.

I was going to barf.

I didn't expect the quest itself to be too difficult, but being responsible for the lives of these hunters was another matter altogether—another reason for my stepping away from treasure vaults was that I didn't want to kill any of my friends because of my ineptitude.

Concealing my snowballing anxiety, I pretended to consider the matter. "Hmm...I'm sure there's someone who'd be a better match than me..."

I don't want to do this; I don't want to do this; I don't want to do this—someone read my mind!

"Obsidian Cross is already there, but they specialize in hunting," said Eva with a sigh. "They may be an effective party, but their leadership doesn't compare to yours."

So Eva can't read my mind after all... Wait a minute.

"That's right," I said. "I got it!"

"Is something the matter?" asked Eva.

She'd reminded me that I'd sent Obsidian Cross to Gark. And as I'd hoped for, Gark must've tasked them with the initial investigation. They were certainly one of the top five parties in First Steps: they could hold their own in combat. Their leader, Sven, was like a trusty older brother and was well-liked in the clan too; he'd be a perfect choice to lead the hunters gathered here. Eva suggested that I'd be a better leader than Sven, but that was complete nonsense.

This bit of good news lightened the weight on my shoulders. With Obsidian Cross already on the scene, the quest was as good as over.

How much money did the Association fork over anyway?

Frowning dramatically, I pretended like I was thinking the option

through. “All right, I think I’ll tag along.”

“What? Krai Baby, are you serious?!” cried Liz. She knew me well enough to think that my voluntarily going into danger was not a normal occurrence.

“But,” I said, looking around at the room full of clanmates, “there’s something urgent I need to attend to first, so I’ll catch up to you later. In the meantime, I’m putting Obsidian Cross in charge.”

Behold my magnificent deflection of responsibility! I’ll come check on you lot once the investigation is over. Good luck, everybody!

“Krai Baby, is this investigation *that* difficult?” asked Liz as we watched the other First Steps hunters pour out of the clan house lobby.

Usually, hunters’ expressions were alight with anticipation and thrill as they embarked on quests, but these hunters looked like they were marching towards the gallows—I didn’t recall saying that this quest would be difficult though. It certainly wouldn’t be a walk in the park, but we’d taken the precaution to send in that many hunters anyway.

What made them so sure that there’ll be terrible challenges ahead?

“You haven’t led a party in years,” whined Liz, almost childishly. “Even if you’re just catching up later, you’re still going with them when you barely tag along with *our* hunts!”

I hadn’t stepped away from leading parties for my own benefit but for the safety of everyone involved. Even back when the other Grievors dragged me from vault to vault, I’d rarely given any directions—simply because I had the unfortunate propensity to crack under pressure. The most influence I’d dared pose on my team at the time was answering their yes-no questions from time to time, but even that had led to disastrous outcomes more than once.

Grieving Souls had prospered not because of my leadership but in spite of it.

And upon coming to terms with my uselessness the hard way, I’d retired from making decisions for the team.

Liz should’ve known this better than anyone. It was all the more perplexing, then, that she was looking at me in this way.

“I have my reasons,” I told her without much thought as per usual.

“What are they? Why can’t I come?” she pleaded. “Why not? You wouldn’t want to bring Ark if it wasn’t something good. Please, Krai Baby?”

Liz’s pink eyes glittered with anticipation for a life-threatening challenge.

Her tendency for senseless violence didn’t extend to Ark out of her respect for his abilities. Apparently, even the Stifled Shadow couldn’t

make easy prey of the multitalented magic-Swordsman, Ark Rodin.

She's hopeless; her brain is fried.

As Liz shook me by the arm like a toddler begging for candy, I let out a sigh and said, "It's just that you don't play well with others."

"What?" replied Liz in disbelief. "Don't worry! Everyone else will go along with whatever I do."

Exactly what I just said.

Meanwhile, Tino apprehensively watched her mentor.

And so, I decided to pinch Liz by her cheeks. She looked at me and blinked.

I continued pinching as I said, "You just came back from your last hunt, Liz. You should get some rest."

Just staying at home will make everyone happy—it'll make me happy.

Liz beamed at me, and I couldn't help but wish that she always looked this nonviolent.

"You're such a gentleman, Krai Baby! But we're fine though, *aren't we, T?*"

Tino nodded furiously like there was a dagger on her throat. "Y-Yes! We're great, Lizzy... Master."

"See?" added Liz.

Liz and I had known each other for a long time, pretty much our entire lives, so I could often tell what she was up to just by looking at her. That mischievous look in her eyes could only mean that she was going to sneak off to the vault, and I couldn't let that happen. It wasn't that I thought the high elixir would be wasted on her endeavor, but I just had this vivid vision of her trampling through the treasure vault like she owned the place, shoving all the carefully exploring parties to the side.

And so, I pulled Liz in by the shoulder and whispered conspicuously, "Calm down, Liz. You'll...have another job to do."

I'd have her tag along as my bodyguard when I eventually decided to join the parties.

Liz blinked at me a few times before saying disappointedly, "Oh, really? Okay then."

This should stop her from leaving the capital without me knowing.

Over the years of knowing the Grievors, I'd picked up a trick or two. I suspected the fact that I knew how to tame the most troublesome hunters in the clan was a contributing factor to why they still kept me as clan master over the universally well-regarded Ark.

Liz subtly curled her lips up. "You want me to send just T then? Those phantoms with all sorts of weapons would be *perfect* for this training I'm cooking up for her."

Pump the brakes!

The other First Steps hunters should keep Tino from being beaten up as badly as she'd been last time, but it just seemed like she and White Wolf's Den weren't a good fit; her fluky encounter with the freakish phantom demonstrated that.

As a solo hunter, Tino wasn't well suited for wide-range search quests like this. She didn't have specialized knowledge for the job, and the phantoms in that vault seemed a bit overleveled for her.

Liz, I thought, this must be a foreign concept to you, but you're supposed to leave a healthy margin for error when you go to treasure vaults.

After what happened last time, sending Tino back to White Wolf's Den would make me a terrible master. And I wanted to be a *cool* master—especially to a girl like Tino.

"No," I told Liz.

"Aw."

"End of discussion."

"Aw..."

I let go of her shoulder and looked up to find Lyle, a stocky, young hunter, approaching me. He wasn't an OG member of the clan, but he was pretty close to being one. He was a little taller than me and wore a set of steel armor that shone in a myriad of dull battle scars. This Level 5 hunter and I were close in age, so I got along with him more than most members.

Lyle uneasily watched Liz for a few moments before asking me, "Krai, do you...really think we'll make it?"

I could see a flock of hunters, at some distance away, sheepishly watching us.

Apparently Lyle had drawn the short straw. But why was he asking me this? I knew so little about this quest, maybe even less than him and the others recruited to take part in the quest.

That being said, I was their clan master, and I was going to act like it. With a big thumbs up, I encouraged my comrades, "This may be a difficult quest, but I'm sure you lot will complete it no matter what!"

I thought this would lead up to some sort of cheer or applause, but I was met with silence only. Lyle and the rest of the hunters all looked like they weren't sure what to say.

Huh. That's odd.

Then Lyle timidly asked, "Well, um...could you, as clan master and a Level 8 hunter, give us...a few pointers?"

"Pointers?" I parroted.

That was quite the conundrum.

Pointers from me? When I've no clue how this quest is going to go? I wouldn't waste my breath giving them pointers about exploring treasure

vaults: watch out for phantoms; get along with each other; Thieves should lead and find booby traps; try not to explore alone. What good would that do? I grunted for a while with a pinched brow as I thought. *Something else then. I know.*

With a sigh, I said, “I don’t know if you’ll come across it, but be careful if you see a slime-looking thing.”

I can’t give you real pointers anyway, I thought. Where did that Sitri Slime go?

Lyle looked at me like I’d lost my mind. Rude.

“Slime?! There’re no slimes in White Wolf’s Den!” he exclaimed.

Treasure vaults were normally occupied with phantoms that were specific to the location. Even if external monsters were to wander into a vault, they were often killed by native phantoms before long. And so it was actually pretty rare to find other monsters deep within a vault.

I couldn’t blame him for reacting like that when I mentioned the most pathetic monster of them all.

“Like I said, I don’t know if you’ll come across it.”

“Not that I’m doubting you, but...” persisted Lyle, “let me ask you this: what made you say ‘slime’ of all things?”

I just smiled at him without a word.

The group of hunters behind him began discussing how to counter slimes—that was a concerning level of gullibility.

“If you do, it won’t be a normal slime. So be careful,” I added.

“It won’t be a normal—” said Lyle. “What do you mean?!”

As if I know.

Since it *has* the word “slime” in its name, I assumed it’d have similar weaknesses as other slimes did. But Sitri could be really thorough about these things...

Lyle and the hunters went into a tizzy as they tried to make heads or tails of my remark.

Smiling at them all the while, I was silently kowtowing for their forgiveness in my mind.

“Are you really going, sir?” asked Kaina with a concerned frown. Gark Welter snorted in response.

His attire was unusual for conducting business at the Zebrudia branch of Explorers’ Association. Instead of his usual outfit, he wore a set of deep-red armor that provided protection without hindering his movements, accompanied by a horned helmet; the armor and helmet were covered all over with countless marks—testaments to the many battles Gark had survived. Along with a tool belt that allowed him quick access to his items, he also carried a large machete that had much more utility than just cutting down enemies. And out of his

outfit, the most notable piece was the halberd in his right hand that was as tall as himself. The bluish-black weapon was a bizarre iteration of a halberd with a blade much larger than its point as if it was designed to swipe rather than to stab. All of these were pieces of equipment Gark had used and kept from his treasure-hunting days.

Long ago, before the Endurers, beings who claimed to have experienced the entirety of history, even existed, there had been a group of people devoted to smithing and battling. They'd mastered the art of blacksmithing and had developed the unique ability to infuse metals with magical power to create brand-new metals. Since they'd also been experienced warriors who revered the art of war, these people created numerous weaponry with their craft and used them to protect their prosperity.

Eons had passed, and now there was hardly any trace left of that civilization. Their technique of forging the unique metals had been lost to time—many a Magus and blacksmith had tried to revive the art to no avail.

The products of their marvelous technique, however, had not been lost. In fact, most weapon Relics found in treasure vaults were assumed to be recreations of items from that era of advanced magical weaponry.

A greatsword that controlled fire. A sword that was forever light and unbreakable. A lance that split the air itself and struck several meters beyond its tip. These were all examples of Relics that could tear through monsters and phantoms with bodies more durable than ordinary metal.

Since mastering a Relic required a long time, hunters rarely carried with them a large number of Relics. To compensate for that, most hunters chose weapons from this era of advanced magical weaponry as trusty arms they could trust their life on.

Gark's halberd was no exception. It was constantly clad in frigid air, and it froze the blood of those it slashed.

Gark had used his trusty weapon—Hail's Tusk—to climb his way up to Level 7. Despite the numerous offers—which had come in when he retired—to take it off of his hands, Gark could never let go of his weapon.

He held the weapon in his hand for the first time in a long while, and the halberd responded with a cold sensation in his palm that reminded Gark of old times.

Kaina saw great exhilaration in his menacing expression. "Sir, you're not a hunter anymore," she remarked. "You remember that, don't you?"

"I know. I won't go overboard," said Gark.

"This quest should be smooth sailing since First Steps is fully

supporting it. With Obsidian Cross already on the scene, I hardly see the necessity for you to go.”

Gark clicked his tongue and shifted his weight. With that, the tip of his halberd scratched the ceiling and frosted the mark it left behind. Even with over a hundred kilograms of metal on him in the form of weapon and armor, Gark moved with the same dexterity as he always had.

“I’m not letting Liz get away with this!” roared Gark. “I may not be at my peak, but I got experience on my side. No hunter’s gonna treat me like that!”

“So childish...” muttered Kaina as Gark looked the other way.

Given Gark’s moniker “War Demon,” there were very few people in the entire empire who underestimated the former Level 7 hunter’s abilities—Liz had really gotten to him.

Gark, as if to make an excuse for himself, added, “This job smells fishy. He needs Ark? This isn’t your run-of-the-mill gig! I’d better be there when things go down. And this helps to make a show to the empire too, after wrenching that budget increase out of them.”

Gark had commissioned double the number of hunters the empire had expected to send. He’d managed to secure the additional funds in part not only because of Krai’s status but also because Gark was well-known among the higher-ups of the empire. The Vault Investigation Bureau, the empire’s institution in charge of managing treasure vaults, was also watching this quest with a skeptical eye, so Gark concluded that he’d better reassure the government by going to the front line himself.

Hand on her forehead, Kaina slowly exhaled. *I can’t stop him; there’s no way*, she thought. *Once a hunter, always a hunter.*

“I’ll leave your paperwork on your desk,” she said, “so expect to work late nights once you return.”

“You won’t hurt my feelings if you took care of them for me,” suggested Gark.

“No, thank you.”

Kaina’s swift rejection left Gark letting out a forlorn sigh.

The space seemed too spacious and bright to be underground. Yet, its dirt ceiling and walls were compacted so neatly that the space looked almost like an ordinary aboveground room.

Papers were strewn all over the rows of desks; folders filled the bookshelves along the wall to the brim; and a stinging smell permeated the cold air. Contained on shelves were labeled vials of medicines lined up one after one. Also in the room was a round table covered nearly entirely with piles of a report written in a strange

language quite distinct from the empire's official language.

Presently, Magi, each in a different robe, congregated in the room. Their expressions were alight with excitement, animosity, and a hint of fear in anticipation of the battle to come.

The Master of Magi stood in the center of them and said, "The Association spared no expense it seems."

Noctus assumed that White Wolf's Den, his former research grounds, was being ransacked by a flood of hunters. His assumption had been based on the fact that the number of hunters assigned to investigate the unusual occurrences in the treasure vault—as Noctus had learned from an informant within the government—far surpassed what he'd expected. While it wasn't unusual for high-level hunters to take on investigations of disturbances in treasure vaults, there were far too many of them for a mere investigation like this. Considering that most of those hunters were members of First Steps, it was clear who'd orchestrated the raid.

"Thousand Tricks!" spat Noctus. "*A mere hunter* dares take on Akashic Tower head-on?!"

After everything the Level 8 hunter had done to interfere with their operation, Noctus certainly hadn't expected the Thousand Tricks to simply walk away. But this response of his was an insult to the magic syndicate: instead of a surprise attack or raid on the Tower's branch in the capital, he simply threw more hunters into White Wolf's Den.

Generally speaking, Magi grew stronger the more they could prepare for a fight. It was critical, if one wanted to take out a group of Magi, to strike before they had a chance to gear up for the fight. The Thousand Tricks completely ignored this idea—he'd gone through the trouble of warning the syndicate of having discovered their base of operations.

Now that he was sending a team to push through the treasure vault head-on, it seemed like he paid the Tower no mind at all.

So prideful of him, but could he afford to be?

This lack of regard for the most dangerous magic syndicate in the world was enough to enrage the Magus.

Noctus couldn't guess the Thousand Tricks's intentions, but his mind was already made up. Preparations had already been made, and Sophia had returned in time. If the Thousand Tricks was going to stand in the way of their search for the ultimate truth, they would annihilate him.

Flick, Noctus's second apprentice, cocked a brow. "Master, while Ark Rodin is—fortunately—away from the capital, their team still has plenty of high-level hunters, not to mention *the* Grieving Souls. They may prove to be formidable."

The defense system Noctus and his team had set up was powerful enough to overtake a team of average hunters. And on top of that, the Magi researchers could cast highly destructive spells that were boosted by the mana material the researchers absorbed during their time under the treasure vault. But still, the prospect of facing Grieving Souls, a treasure-hunter party infamous for risking their lives to conquer higher- and higher-level vaults, left the Magi with a dash of fear.

At this point, Sophia chimed in, “They won’t be an issue. That party is currently away from the capital, save for two—no, three members. There’s the Thousand Tricks, who always watches the world from the capital. Then there’s Liz Smart the Stifled Shadow, who has made a sudden return. And lastly there’s Sitri Smart, the dreadful Alchemist who has followed.” Fixed on the strange instrument in the center of the room, her crimson eyes were ablaze.

The machine was the culmination of Noctus’s research. Despite his exile from the empire and the world of academia, he still had managed to nearly complete this device that interfered with the flow of mana material. This unbelievable piece of technology had restructured the ecosystem of White Wolf’s Den. Noctus considered—compared to this breakthrough—the previous research he conducted as the Master of Magi mere child’s play.

Experimental research on mana material, one of the core elements of the world, was taboo in every nation. The powerful force was treated with reverence, and its inner workings were considered sacred; knowledge of the fundamental truth behind such a thing was reserved for gods alone. Since the days of yore, prophecies had always warned that studying mana material to this extent could cause world-ending devastations.

Now that Noctus had finally reached the first guidepost to the ultimate truth he sought, he wouldn’t stand to lose any more time.

“You know much about Grieving Souls,” remarked Flick incredulously. “So half of them are away from the capital? How did you figure that out?”

Sophia smiled. “I don’t bury my head in research. I’ve my own set of eyes independent of Akashic Tower.”

Their spy in the capital made a face at her words, but Sophia didn’t flinch. Her confidence had convinced the Magi of her claim; the first apprentice, who was talented in everything but spell casting, and who never hesitated to complete her research by any means necessary, could very plausibly have her own spy.

The spy challenged her further, “Are you confident you’ll crush them?”

Utterly unbothered, Sophia answered, “Our defense system is

designed to defeat the likes of Grieving Souls—the best treasure hunters in the capital.”

The spy scoffed and said, “It better—after all the money we’ve put into that thing.”

While Akashic Tower was one of the most powerful magic syndicates, their funds were not limitless. The question of how much funding to invest in this defense system had been a contentious topic that, once again, had divided Sophia from the other apprentices.

“The Stifled Shadow is a Thief,” continued Sophia. “She is incredibly fast but not too offensive. She’s easily countered if we prepare against physical attacks. And while the Thousand Tricks has an unfathomable myriad of tricks up his sleeve, he’s only the brains behind the operation—he won’t be a true threat without the full team to bring his leadership to fruition; while many First Steps members are capable hunters, they aren’t good enough for the leadership of the Thousand Tricks.”

“A silver lining it is,” said Noctus. “Then, we must practice caution against...Sitri.”

For the first time since the meeting commenced, Sophia’s expression clouded.

Every experienced Magus in the capital was aware of Sitri Smart, the Alchemist who had formerly gone by the moniker “The Prodigy”; she’d been demoted for a crime she didn’t commit. While Noctus had never met her face-to-face, he’d heard tales of her talent. He’d always felt some sympathy for the Alchemist; perhaps, if she hadn’t been a hunter, he would’ve recruited her for the Tower and they would’ve conducted research together.

Sophia’s hesitation raised the tension in the room, but that only lasted for a moment. “She won’t be a problem. Sitri may be talented, but she operates on a different mindset than ours. Mana material has strengthened her physically, but that’s all. Flick, do you think an Alchemist bound by the laws of the empire can break through a defense system I’ve constructed with no such constraints in mind?”

Flick bit his lip in anger. As a powerful Magus and pursuer of knowledge, he knew full well that no matter how much he outperformed Sophia in pure spell casting, he couldn’t hold a candle to her abilities when it came to research. Despite the protest of his prideful heart, his scientific mind admitted it. Noctus’s research was more in the field of Alchemy, and Sophia possessed extraordinary talent in that area.

“Then why the sour look, Sophia?” asked Noctus.

The first apprentice, with her flaming hair and eyes, uncharacteristically raised her voice and said, “Master! Just like the Thousand Tricks, Sitri is catching on to our existence and research.

She has been searching for your research, starting with the thesis you left in the empire.”

Now, Noctus’s expression changed.

Noctus had first dreamed of controlling mana material back when he had been an official member of an academic institution in the capital. He had been young and had made the mistake of expressing his taboo aspirations. That had led to his expulsion from the capital, but he had left his thesis—the starting point of his life’s work—in the possession of said academic institution; it wasn’t a stretch to think a copy of it was kept somewhere.

Sophia, in contrast to her usual demeanor as “the calculating researcher,” was ablaze with emotion, inspiring fear that replaced envy in the other apprentices.

“She’s a nemesis of mine in research; I must destroy her at all costs. Master, allow me to utilize all the resources we’ve created to get rid of the intruders.”

“Very well. You shall have full rein, Sophia, my most skilled apprentice. Flick, everyone, I command you to follow Sophia’s lead. Consider her words mine henceforth.”

“Yes, Master! All in pursuit of your glorious mission,” said Sophia. An irrepressible glee lit her expression.

Chapter Four: Obsidian Cross and First Steps

The sound of metal violently clashing reverberated through the tight corridors in the underground cave. And followed by it were a wolf's howl and a quaking thud.

More hunters were currently congregated in the perpetually unpopular White Wolf's Den than there ever had been. And among them was the party Obsidian Cross, one of the founding parties of First Steps.

There were six members in the Crosses, all averaging over Level 5 despite them being in their midtwenties. Rightfully, they were considered one of the parties in the capital with a better prospect than most.

In particular, their leader, Sven Anger the "Stormstrike," was among the best Archers in the city. But since magic was the go-to method for hunters when attacking over long ranges, Archers like Sven were a rare breed. While every arrow they fired could be devastating, they were limited by the number of arrows in their quiver and their lack of versatility like Magi had. All in all, they were considered to be at a disadvantage when exploring treasure vaults. And yet, Sven had chosen the bow but still had earned himself a moniker with it. This was also an indication that Obsidian Cross emphasized hunting monsters over delving into vaults, which was a rarity for hunting parties.

Now, Sven was leading the rest of his party, all of whom were armed in full sets of metallic black armor. Among them were two Swordsmen, who utilized their swords and shields to launch a variety of attacks. Alongside them were two Magi, one specializing in defensive magic and another in magic attacks covering large areas. And at the rear of the group walked their newest member, Henrik the Cleric, their healing expert.

Despite the gloominess in the corridor, they showed no trepidation. Dark, damp caves, the electrifying tension of battlefields, and even the expectation of charging into powerful enemy territories were nothing new to Obsidian Cross.

Sven came to a sudden stop and readied his black-as-night longbow, a weapon undecorated, bare, and brutal. Following their leader, his party members stopped their march behind him.

In one fluid motion, Sven drew a long arrow from his quiver and nocked it on his bow. The bowstring creaked as Sven pulled it, and the bow curved.

Just as a head poked around the corner ahead of Sven, he loosed. The arrow tore through the air like a cannonball and blew the crimson wolf knight's head clean off before burying deep into the cavern wall. The headless phantom twitched slightly before dissipating into thin air; the perfect shot didn't allow the wolf knight so much as a howl or a whimper.

Sven retrieved the arrow from the wall, and he resumed walking through the corridor.

Obsidian Cross had encountered a considerable number of phantoms in the vault. But regardless of the color of their fur, any wolf knight that had come into their path had had their skull obliterated by Sven's arrow before they could make a sound.

While Obsidian Cross preferred monster hunting to treasure vault exploring, they were perfectly capable of taking on vaults. This was especially true when the vault in question was White Wolf's Den where dangerous gimmicks and the risk of being surrounded by swarms of phantoms didn't exist. And so the party members looked rather relaxed, save for Henrik.

Halfway through the vault, Sven halted and casually said, "Sure, the vault is leveled up, but there's nothing too out of the ordinary here."

And Marietta the Magus lazily said, "The first group of hunters couldn't find anything either."

Surely, White Wolf's Den had undergone some changes, but they hadn't discovered the cause; nothing in the vault so far had been alarming. Obsidian Cross was much more specialized in combat than investigation, and so its members suspected that the Association had expected too much of them. If the situation was so dire that a meticulous investigation was required, they should've sent parties with the appropriate skill sets for that.

Hesitantly, Henrik interjected, "Do you think this really required us, Sven?"

"Well..." Sven scratched his cheek. "When someone like that asks you to..."

This quest had been requested of them when the Crosses had stopped by the Association to deliver Krai's message. They had had no obligation to take it, but they also had had no reason to turn down a favor from the branch manager himself.

Henrik was unsatisfied that his party had been practically sent on an errand just to get roped into a quest.

"There can be much to learn from diving into a treasure vault,"

said Sven as if in consolation. “Besides, I said you could’ve stayed behind.”

Henrik straightened his back and said, “I couldn’t forsake our party like that—”

The Swordsman who’d been silently marching behind slapped the rookie on his back, putting the boy into a coughing fit. That drew some laughter from the party.

“B-But—” spoke Henrik between coughs. “It feels like we’re cleaning up the CM’s mess.”

“His mess?” Sven gave him a wild smile. “Well, Henrik. You’ll get it—someday.”

Their exploration carried on without difficulty. After all, even with the recent spike in level, these wolf knights were still two levels below the phantoms Obsidian Cross usually contended with.

Sven’s only cause for wariness would’ve been the boss that had defeated a Level 5 hunter, but it apparently hadn’t respawned yet after being eliminated by the Stifled Shadow.

His party was working smoothly, and they’d even been able to reserve their most powerful splash-damage fighter, Marietta; neither had there been any alarms from the other parties investigating the other parts of the vault.

It’s too easy, thought Sven. The complete lack of danger seemed terribly ominous to him.

The Crosses were carrying on through the corridor, halfway to the boss room, when the satchel on Sven’s belt vibrated. He quickly produced a black rock from within it.

First Steps’s highly organized structure among its members—both its hunters and its many nonhunter employees—was unique among the larger clans in the capital. This was a rarity for an organization of hunters, who, by nature, detested rules. Most other clans were simply congregations of a few parties with minimal guiding structure.

The black rock Sven had produced was a Sounding Stone. These unique Relics were found in pairs; any words spoken into one would be replayed by the other one of the pair. Like any other Relic, they required practice to be used effectively. But while they could be tricky to use, they were incredibly useful communication devices. And so, Sven had left one of their stones at the clan headquarters so they could be contacted immediately in emergencies.

Sounding Stones cost a small fortune, and, worse, the constantly high demand for them meant that none stayed long on store shelves. At the consensus of his party, Sven had purchased a pair, and it was only through making several connections to the right people had he been able to get his hands on one set.

As he stood with the stone to his ear, Sven felt his expression

darken by the second.

Only a few words had come through to him.

“Got it,” he replied. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

He stowed the powered-down stone before turning to his party members, who had been silently watching for phantoms.

“We’re going aboveground,” said Sven. “Our situation has changed: Krai’s sending more Steps hunters. Also, watch out for *slimes*. We gotta relay the message to other parties too. Now blow the whistle for retreat.”

“What...? What?”

Ignoring the befuddled Henrik, one of the Swordsmen blew the whistle, sounding an alarm throughout the cavern.

“Give me a break, Crosses...” said a brown-haired hunter glowering at Sven. He belonged to another party tasked with investigating White Wolf’s Den.

Sven recalled the introductions they had exchanged before entering the vault: he was Gein, a Level 5 Swordsman with a nasty mouth and attitude. Still, having been recruited to this quest meant he could at least handle himself in a vault.

A tense atmosphere hung over the hunters just outside White Wolf’s Den despite the fact that the hunters had already taken out the phantoms on watch. These were all the parties within that had escaped the vault as soon as they’d heard the whistle.

Treasure hunters were in constant competition with each other. But while treasure vaults practically never ran out of resources, they only produced so much loot at any given time. As a result, it was common for hunter parties to clash when they ran into each other in vaults.

There was no law enforcement beyond the city limits; some parties even made a living primarily by robbing other treasure hunters. And so, reasonably, parties wanted to conceal their strategies from others to avoid being at a disadvantage in case of conflict.

Customarily, when several parties participated in a single quest, they operated independently. However, in this kind of official governmental investigation quests filled with unknown elements, at least some level of coordination was necessary. Hence, the whistle signal had been agreed upon by the parties in this investigation—each party would handle their business alone until they encountered something they couldn’t.

Nearly twenty hunters now stood by the entrance to the cave, having heard Sven’s whistle. Gein was the only one to be explicitly pointing a finger at Sven, but the others seemed to share his

sentiment.

“Let me get this straight,” said Gein. “So even though you haven’t seen any emergency, you’ve blown the whistle based on—what—one stone call?”

“That’s right,” answered Sven without hesitation.

Sven was unaffected by the mix of looks from the fully armed hunters: looks of animosity, curiosity, derision, and approval.

The hunters broke into murmurs at Sven’s confidence. Even Gein frowned at this reaction.

Obsidian Cross was famous for their careful strategies and for their composition where every member had healing abilities. At times, these were mistaken for cowardice by other hunters, but their results didn’t lie. Moreover, the fact that the Crosses had earned such a high level without losing any of their members along the way commanded respect. That being said, the other hunters didn’t approve of the Crosses causing such an unnecessary stir to this joint quest in which parties of all levels and affiliations were involved.

Gein clicked his tongue and loudly spoke to the group, “Anyone saw anything? What about that boss we’ve been told of?”

“Not really.”

“We haven’t. Bumped into a few phantoms, but we took care of them. Not a problem.”

“I heard the Stifled Shadow killed the boss. Doubt we’ll see it for a while.”

Answered each party’s leader briefly.

White Wolf’s Den was a medium-sized treasure vault. While its winding corridors created a complicated layout, it shouldn’t take long for this many veteran hunters to sweep through the whole place even if they moved warily. Considering that the only potential threat—the boss—had already been eliminated, this quest wasn’t quite difficult save for the fact that the sudden changes in the vault remained unexplained. That being said, their quest was to investigate the current state of White Wolf’s Den, not to uncover the root cause of its changes.

Gein snorted and glared at Sven, who met his gaze head-on. “You heard ’em,” said Gein. “You put more stock in the words of some guy who can’t even be bothered to come down here over our judgment. I got that right?” He sounded like he was ready to draw his sword if it weren’t for the other hunters there.

As antagonistic as Gein was, his assertion was hard to argue with. In fact, Sven would’ve been disgruntled too if their roles had been reversed. Next to him, Henrik nervously looked from Sven to Gein and back.

Sven slowly looked around the group of hunters. “That’s about

right,” he said with a shrug.

Gein’s eyes bulged, his face turned bright red, and his brows furrowed. He stepped forward as if he was about to clock Sven right in the face when Sven let out a long sigh.

“Pathetic,” spat Sven.

“What did you say?!” barked Gein.

“Just to be clear,” said Sven, “we blew that whistle out of our kindness.”

Sven watched the faces in the crowd drain of color.

The wolves were howling from deep within the cave as if they were trying to intimidate the intruders who’d suddenly vanished. Sven couldn’t help but feel like it was a bad omen.

“Grieving Souls would *not* have blown that whistle: Krai would’ve told you that you’re fine; Liz and Luke just wouldn’t have cared; Sitri—she would’ve just sent you guys in and watched. But we are *healers*—it’s not our style to stand by and let people die.”

Hunters took their lives into their own hands. While there was an unwritten code for them to work together in dire situations, Sven didn’t owe that warning to any of them. Still, he blew the whistle despite expecting backlash like this. And that was why Sven had been so calm throughout this interaction.

Leaning his back onto a tree trunk, Sven trod the grass under his heel and said, “Bunch of our clan members will be here soon. Going back into the vault can wait until then. But if you wanna kill yourselves, by all means go right ahead. We’ll wait here.”

Sven waited for Gein to respond, who stood there speechless.

“A good payment’s of no use to a dead man,” said Sven. “This tip’s for free though. You’re welcome.”

Each member of the investigation would receive a set amount of base pay plus bonuses for coming back with particularly valuable information. This practice of employing multiple parties for a single quest promoted healthy competition among hunters.

Gein bit his lip. He knew the reward for a good tip was a significant sum. But while his party had been investigating the vault even before the Crosses had arrived, they hadn’t found anything worthwhile for a bonus. Although it was unlikely that they would make new discoveries even if they went back into the vault now, he also knew that First Steps’s masses would weaken their odds even more.

Like many hunters, Gein was driven by greed—at least more so than normies. He hadn’t sensed great risk in the current situation, and neither had the other hunters, who were sharing confused looks. Apparently everyone was going through the same thought process as Gein was.

This whistle would *not* have been taken seriously had it not been blown by a famous party.

Finally, another hunter blurted, “These phantoms here are wolves—there’s no way any slime will be popping up! And who cares even if one does? We have a Magus in our party!”

All the hunters except for the Crosses would’ve considered a slime appearing in White Wolf’s Den highly improbable, if not downright impossible—this shouldn’t even have warranted consideration at all.

Letting out another weary sigh, Sven said, “I’ll never forget that day, back when Steps was still in its infancy: our CM, Krai, invited us to go flower-viewing at a spot outside the city.”

The gravity in his voice silenced the entire group—even Gein, who had been furiously grinding his teeth, lent an ear. The other Crosses were listening with bitter expressions; only Henrik, among the party, curiously watched their party leader.

““Going as a group, we won’t need bodyguards,” he said,” retold Sven. ““But since we’re leaving the city, don’t forget your weapons, *just in case.*””

“What are you talking about?” muttered Gein.

“And that spot we went to...became a treasure vault.”

His story drew collective gasps from the crowd.

“Some of you here might remember when this happened,” went on Sven. “The ley lines shifted just a little from a previous earthquake, and it caused the ley lines to cross right at the spot we had gone to view the flowers. Has anyone here ever watched a treasure vault materialize in front of their own eyes? *That* was something—it was like hell itself cracking open, its content oozing up to the surface. Not that you’d ever come across something like that though.”

No one said a word. They couldn’t.

Hunters were naturally sensitive towards news on treasure vaults. In fact, the appearance of this particular vault had been a big story back when it had happened. Every hunter here seemed to recall hearing about this treasure vault, one so dangerous that most hunters refused to even set foot in despite its proximity to the capital.

In utter disbelief, Gein stammered and said, “You don’t mean...the Garden, do you?”

In the mere three years since its appearance, this treasure vault had earned a whopping rating of Level 7 and the reputation as the worst treasure vault on the outskirts of the capital. The vault had made the news again recently when Ark Rodin had conquered it, but, indeed, there were only a handful of hunters who could so much as dream of taking on this treasure vault.

Since the “Garden incident,” a rumor had quietly emerged within First Steps. It had seemed outlandish at first, but the rumor had grown

to seem more and more believable as evidence had continued to stack up in its favor.

“The Thousand Tricks...can see the future,” said Sven, iterating the rumor.

“That’s,” said Gein, flinching as he spoke, “impossible.”

Members of First Steps revered the mysterious yet precise foresight of their clan master, but they also feared the Thousand Trials he issued without warning as part of his predictions.

“He’s got a Relic that allows him to,” added Sven. “It’s just a rumor, and he’ll deny it up and down. I only believe in what I see. And that’s why I paid a fortune for a pair of Sounding Stones: to learn *his* intel as quickly as possible—huge money’s on the line.”

Furthermore, Sven knew the free-spirited, untamable, and—dare he say it—feral Grievors followed Krai’s orders alone. That alone was enough reason to make Sven wary now—a hunter couldn’t survive if they were reckless.

Sven could hear a pin drop among the hunters. And with a savage smile, he called out to the group, “There. I’ve explained myself. And here’s one last warning: the Thousand Tricks doesn’t bother calling me unless something’s *serious*. So if you still wanna keep going, that’s your prerogative.”

“Dammit,” snarled Gein as he sat down on the ground. “These clanmates of yours better show up soon. No one better accuse me of slacking off.”

It was so peaceful in the clan master’s office. Now that most members had gone off to that vault, the usually lively clan house had gone quiet.

Breaking that silence was Liz, busily buzzing around me restlessly: she hid behind the desk, took sips from the coffee Eva poured, and wrapped her arms around me from behind as she rubbed herself on me.

“Hey, Krai Baby, when are we leaving? What did you want me to do? I’m all ready now!”

That was not very Zen of her.

Tino sat politely at the sofa, trembling in apparent secondhand embarrassment for her mentor’s behavior.

Perhaps Liz had noticed my unamused look, and she gave me an unapologetic smile.

“Sorry, but it’s been *so long* since we’ve gone out together.”

“You’re not bothering me,” I said.

I hated to burst her bubble, but I wasn’t about to give her an opportunity to wreak havoc.

It wasn't like Liz gave herself any downtime to let her destructive energy build up or anything, but she'd caused carnage the likes I hadn't seen even among the roughest and toughest hunters out there. Her bloodbaths were so bad that even hunters at her level avoided her.

The other hunters involved in the quest would not take kindly to her behavior. Not that Liz would care about her reputation, but there was no point letting it plummet any further.

Oblivious to my concerns, Liz quivered and said in a singsong, "Ooh. I couldn't show you my full power last time. I just can't wait to have you watch me fight, Krai Baby! Promise you'll watch me fight?" Her eyes were nearly tearing up.

"Uh-huh," I answered.

I had watched her fight. And I'd had my fill from last time!

Ever since my friends and I had started training to become hunters, Liz had always come to show off her progress to me whenever she felt she'd improved. I'd showered her with compliments as long as I could, until one day when she'd started going so fast I couldn't follow her movements with my eyes anymore. That, though, was a secret I'd kept to myself. She hadn't come to show me any new tricks in a while so I thought she had gotten tired of it, but apparently she had not.

"B-But, Lizzy, I don't think any phantom there will be worthy of you—I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry for interrupting! Please forgive me! Master!" Tino's comment had been stifled by Liz's murderous glare.

What an unstable mentor. I wouldn't be offended by Tino interrupting me. And she hasn't even interrupted anything really, I thought as I stroked the back of Liz's hand as her arm wrapped around me from behind.

Liz let out a quick breath and said, "Don't be stupid, T. What Krai Baby has in mind for me isn't *trivial*. The level of that vault doesn't even matter at this point. Remember your place, T: how *dare* you assume Krai Baby's intentions?"

Crap. She's raising the bar higher and higher. She should've known well by now I'm a pacifist..

Getting worried, I decided to try diverting her enthusiasm. "I like doing dumb things. Wanna go on a date?"

"Yes!" Liz nearly screamed in excitement despite already having gone on a "date" with me twice recently. "That's not dumb!" she said, her cheeks rosy and her eyes glimmering with expectation.

I almost felt bad for suggesting it.

Tino, whom Liz had been treating with less respect than she would a patch of dirt, was staring at the floor as she shook on the

couch.

Liz's mood directly affected how she treated Tino; hopefully this would help Tino out. It was the least I could do since Liz had brought torment and hellfire down on her.

"U-Um...I thought..." said Tino mousily, "I thought Master has a task for—eek!" She cowered.

"Stop threatening her every time she talks, Liz. Poor Tino."

"I didn't *threaten* her," said Liz. "T's flinching all on her own. Besides, T's a good girl; she would never make me angry, would you, T?"

Tino was now losing her mind with fear. If only Liz could be calm like Sitri!

While I stroked Liz's arm to soothe her, I considered my options.

Tino had a solid point. Even though I really didn't feel like it, I did promise to catch up with the hunters at White Wolf's Den. The timing would be tricky though.

I glanced at the clock. *Hmm, still too early. And I have a slime to find.*

There were too many jobs on my plate I wasn't qualified for that I felt like barfing. But of course, I only had myself to blame for all of them. Perhaps I should tell Eva the truth about the Sitri Slime and have her come up with a brilliant solution?

My thoughts whirled in my mind. I leaned back into my chair as if to hide my burning anxiety. There was this inexplicable urge in me to kowtow and apologize.

Things would've been a little easier if the other Grievors had been here: my friends were both the best hunters the clan had and my emotional support system.

"What's wrong, Krai Baby? You looked worried," said Liz.

"Did I?" I said hesitantly. "Nothing's wrong."

"You want to talk to me about it?" she said.

This isn't good.

Apparently I looked so worried that Liz was concerned for me. I was their leader; the least I could do was to provide stability for my party.

"Just wondering what everyone's up to," I said, "especially Sitri. She's pretty late now, isn't she?"

The slime was one thing, but I also needed my Relics charged by Lucia. In a sense, it now seemed like a blessing in disguise that Liz had ditched the treasure vault to come home: even having just one Griever around did wonders for my mental health.

"You're so nice, Krai Baby. But I don't mind if she doesn't come back for a while longer," said Liz mischievously.

She pressed the back of my head between her breasts and slid a

hand down my shirt. I could feel her slender finger gliding over my skin.

“We haven’t gotten to spend time like this in so long, and I want you all to myself a little longer...” whispered Liz. “And Siddy always gets in our way, you know?”

I didn’t remember Sitri doing that, and I thought I’d spent more time with Liz than with any other friend of mine.

All I could do for my friends was to be their emotional support. So I didn’t mind usually when Liz came to me, but she’d gone a little too far with the physical contact if you ask me—Tino was also in the room! I could see Tino kept glancing at us curiously.

Just when I was about to gently redirect her energy, Liz’s finger stopped tickling my chest.

“Hmm...? Wait. Why?” she asked herself hesitantly.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

She released my head from her soft peaks and stared at the door.

“Is it...over already? Is this what you were waiting for? I was wondering why you kept glancing at the clock...” she mumbled.

What? “Over already”? Did she sense something?

As a Thief, she specialized in sniffing things out from a distance.

Did she mean the investigation?

I doubted even she could tell what was going on in White Wolf’s Den from here—and I had just sent out the additional hunters—but I had no other guess. If this was the case, it’d be great news to me: that was one less thing that would make me want to barf.

What talented friends I have! I’m glad they kinda even out my uselessness.

I was grinning at this silly thought when the door quietly opened.

“I’m home,” announced an unexpected voice—a quiet, soothing voice.

Liz frowned and let out an aggressive sigh. “Why did you come back alone so soon? You could’ve taken your time... Isn’t it your job to prep and *clean up*?”

“Jeez! You ditched us to come home alone too, Liz. You are in no position to be mad about that.”

Through the door came a person wearing an oversized, somber-colored coat concealing her silhouette. On her back, she wore a large, gray backpack that was impervious to stains.

Her hair, the same color as Liz’s, was in a neatly trimmed shoulder bob. Her downturned eyes gave off a gentle look below her bangs that reached just below her brow.



She was Sitri Smart, Level 2 Alchemist, the brains of Grieving Souls. She was usually tasked with reconnaissance, prep work, and cleanup tasks.

I'd long awaited her return.

If Liz was the sun, Sitri was the moon. Sitri didn't burst with brilliant rays, but there was a tranquil beauty about her.

Sitri lowered her backpack, smiled at me, and said, "I'm sorry for the delay, Krai."

"Welcome home, Sitri."

My brain was working again. My smile grew in response to hers, and I set aside all my questions for the moment.

"What brings you back?" I said.

"I had...a bad feeling about something," answered the biggest brain in our party quietly.

Sitri was brilliant. She always acted logically, in a way that made it hard to believe that she was sisters with Liz, whose fists moved faster than the synapses in her brain. In fact, Sitri was usually the one who kept the Griever's *improvisational* tendencies in check.

She was the weakest Griever in combat (next to me of course), but that was how things usually were with Alchemists: her wisdom more than made up for her lack of power.

Liz, unamused, watched her sister while Tino hid behind the sofa.

"I sense...something big is about to happen," continued Sitri, "something very bad... I thought you'd require my assistance, so I asked for my leave from the expedition. Unlike my sister here, I didn't ask to return just to see you—of course, I did miss you. Um...am I off the mark at all, Krai?"

Her out-of-the-box thinking and—more than anything—her lightning-fast wit made Sitri a genius in a completely different way than her sister. Sitri probably saw the world in a much different light than I did. In fact, she was so transcendent that her expansive knowledge was also praised by numerous academic institutions.

Sitri had crazy good instincts, so good that I never knew anyone whose hunch was more accurate than hers. Based on my personal experience, her hunches were almost always accurate—especially when they were foreboding.

Sitri clutched the ends of her sleeves and glanced at her sister and Tino as she said, "A powerful enemy—*my* enemy—has appeared. We have to crush it before it grows any stronger, Krai."

Does she know about the slime? But regardless, this is good.

Sitri always showed up when you needed her the most.

I shall tap into that brilliant mind of hers again.

"Liz, Tino, can you excuse us?" I asked. "I gotta have a serious

conversation with Sitri.”

“Whaaat?! No fair! I wanna hear too!” whined Liz.

“L-Lizzy, let’s go... Master has said so... You can’t possibly disobey...” Brave little Tino took the disgruntled Liz by her hand.

I owe her ice cream sometime.

Once we were alone in the room, I began to explain the tricky predicament I found myself in lately. I felt reassured by Sitri, who had been smiling confidently even though she must’ve sensed the gist of what I was telling her.

Sitri engrossed herself in thought and closed her eyes.

Back when we were kids, she’d been a quiet girl who was always reading a book. While her eyes and hair were of the same color as Liz’s, there were some differences between them. Sitri was a bit taller and more well-endowed; she also wasn’t tanned, and she looked gentler than Liz. Still, there were plenty of times when they obviously acted like sisters.

After a few minutes of silence, Sitri smiled at me—she must’ve finished organizing her thoughts. Her eyes were ablaze like her sister’s often were.

“I’m sorry, I hadn’t expected this,” she said. “I didn’t think the slime would grow this much. The capsule was made from a metal furthest from it in composition—”

“Wait, *grow*?” I asked.

“Slimes’ evolutionary speed—in other words, their ability to adapt to their environment—is among the highest of all organisms. As you know, the slime I gave you is one that I’d engineered to enhance its evolutionary speed. Well, it did turn out to be a *failure*.”

She spoke like I should’ve known it, but, as a matter of fact, I didn’t know.

Alchemists were really scholars. Sitri’s desire for the unknown far outshone her sister’s.

She’d remained calm and collected even as I’d told her my devastating mistake. Maybe she’d even expected me to let the slime get away.

“So could it have ‘adapted’ to slip out of the metallic capsule?” I asked.

“Yes, there’s such a possibility. Though it really outperformed my expectations.”

Why have you given me something like that? Keep an eye on that yourself! I thought to myself. Though I dared not say it out loud because I still thought it was more likely for me to have made some blunder than for a slime to have escaped a sealed metal capsule.

Sitri and I went down to my room. She cast her glance all over my neatly made bed and my organized rows of Relics rather than focusing

on the safe that had once held the slime.

I've scoured the room up and down already, so there's no point reinvestigating the place...

"Even if it did make it out of the capsule, it shouldn't have slipped out of your Relic safe," she muttered quietly. Her mutter was a sign of her deep concentration. "That space inside the Faultless Fortress is on a different phase than the space surrounding it. It should've taken the slime a substantial amount of time to overcome that through physical evolution, and there shouldn't have been enough materials for it to evolve enough intellectually to unlock the safe from the inside by itself either. It should've also taken it a long time to learn to pass through objects, and its adaptability should've only allowed it to pass through the metalium alloy its capsule was made of—"

"Sorry, can you give me a summary?" I asked.

"Most likely, the slime had been hiding in the safe *outside* the capsule, and it escaped when you opened the safe," said Sitri, smiling and putting her hands together. "Am I correct?"

How...am I supposed to know? Wait. Does that mean the slime was right there by my hand when I reached into the safe to grab the capsule?

The interior of the safe was unlit, and I'd been in a hurry. So that had been very possible.

I felt a shiver going down my spine.

A slime that could annihilate the entire capital, one whose mere traces the phantoms were afraid of. That thing was right by my hand in my room at some point?!

"How am I...still alive?" I blurted out.

"I did adjust it to not attack you," said Sitri, like that was obvious.

The only things she'd told me were that the thing was dangerous and for me to hold on to it. This wasn't something she should've skimped on when explaining.

"O-Okay, so it is safe to touch...?" I said.

"Well, to us at least. No matter how much I tweaked it, I could only mark two targets to be excluded as its prey," she said. "But to be frank, Krai, that thing is too dangerous to be used as a Trial of yours. I'm very flattered that you're using my creation, but it'll be quite the disaster if it gets registered as a phantom by the world."

What in the world are you talking about? So Sitri and I were safe, but it would attack anyone else indiscriminately? No way, I thought to myself. No way the brilliant Alchemist would hand off a defective monster like that to me!

But on the other hand, Sitri did have a track record of losing perspective when it came to her experiments...

Sitri looked around at the walls and floor then headed to the door to my bathroom at the end of the room.

“There’re no vents nor drains in this room,” she said. “But it’s still a slime, so it’d instinctively prefer moisture. I believe it’d gone into the bathroom. Most likely had escaped through the drain—do I have that right?”

“I keep the door closed when I’m not in here,” I said.

“Gaining mass within the Faultless Fortress wasn’t easy for it, being completely severed from the outside world. But it could easily crawl under a normal door. Isn’t that right, Krai?”

“Uh-huh?”

I was going to barf.

She kept asking me for confirmation, but the only thing I could honestly confirm was that I knew nothing about this slime.

Does Sitri really think I am the kind of person who can easily foresee all this? And hold on, this is a disaster. The drain in the bathroom leads to the sewage system connecting the entire city.

Sitri dusted the front of her robe then adorably crooked her neck and said, “Unlike normal slimes, that slime can easily survive the sewers: there’ll be plenty of bugs and small animals for it to feed on. If it’d acclimated to the dark interiors of the safe, it should also prefer dark places. Not likely that we’ve suffered any human casualties...yet. I see; you’ve thought out every step of the way, haven’t you?” she said.

Yeah, whatever she was talking about. The point I’d caught was that this thing likely hadn’t killed anyone yet.

I quietly sighed in relief; the worst-case scenario had been avoided.

But that being said, even with my nongenius mind, I could imagine that scouring the sewers for it would be a lot of work—who knew if the thing was still alive, even? I doubted either of us could spot it if it hid into the sewage. We couldn’t *give up* on trying to find it though.

Sitri was back in her thoughts, her eyes closed. I kept quiet so as to not disturb her, and she soon opened her eyes.

“I see. I understand. Please leave this to me,” she said, and she quickly changed the topic. “And about another matter—”

“I’ll let you handle it if you say so, but is there something else?” I said.

I’d let her handle it since she’d offered, but I wondered what else had to be taken care of so urgently.

Sitri leaned her body against mine. While she was taller than Liz, she was still shorter than average and so shorter than me. From her, I could smell traces of a sweet herb.

Entirely seriously, she said, “I think I know the cause behind the changes to White Wolf’s Den. Indeed very dangerous—the entire

investigation team may end up dead.”

The ground rumbled as the caravan arrived. Rolling in were several wagons, each adorned with First Steps’s crest. These wagons were drawn by hefty armored horses, animals trained to remain calm even under the eerie aura of treasure vaults.

From the caravan, passengers—Steps hunters—disembarked. There was no uniformity among them save for the clan’s crest they each wore in one way or another. These hunters looked neither free-spirited nor happy-go-lucky as they usually were; their serious expressions and efficient movements appeared like a military battalion on a suicide mission.

The hunters who’d been exploring White Wolf’s Den, except for the members of Obsidian Cross, watched with flabbergasted expressions as the reinforcements arrived. They’d expected a grim march of hunters, but certainly not reinforcements of this multitude. Never had such a large team of hunters set foot in White Wolf’s Den simultaneously before.

Gein, who’d been cursing and grumbling as he waited for their arrival, was taken aback. “How many hunters did you call? What? Are they trying to bring the whole vault down?”

A treasure vault encompassed the entire area on which it stood. Therefore, destroying a vault’s structures—underground or otherwise—did not erase it from the map by any means. Tampering with the ley lines below a treasure vault could theoretically destroy it for good, but that wasn’t realistic. Despite that, these hunters emanated such powerful determination that the thought of them obliterating the entire vault had crossed Gein’s mind.

Lyle, a young man with deep features, jumped out of the leading wagon and ran up to Sven. He was a year younger and was lower in level than Sven, but members of First Steps were all of equal rank within the clan.

“Hey, Sven, how’s it?” asked Lyle.

“Nothing has happened yet,” said Sven, quickly looking over the newly arrived hunters. “Is anyone in charge? We *could* do our own thing, but desperate times...”

Meanwhile, the other hunters swiftly climbed off of the wagons and spread out in formation ready to defend the area.

A hunting party, by design, was supposed to be complete and balanced on its own. Hunters from multiple parties would never follow a common leader under normal circumstances. But in an operation of this magnitude, operating without at least a common direction could lead to unnecessary casualties.

Lyle curled his lips and said, “Crosses are top dogs. Your party’s the highest level here. Krai told us to follow your lead.”

“I know Krai never shows up for these things. But where’s Liz? I know she’d kill to be here,” asked Sven.

“Krai took her and Tino aside. He’s got another gig for them,” said Lyle with a bitter expression.

Sven decided not to ask how that had gone down, and he said, “That’s...fortunate.”

He was curious about what the gig Krai had in mind for Liz was, but he pushed that thought to the back of his mind. At any rate, he’d take the win that Liz—and her destructive lack of consideration for her clanmates—wouldn’t jeopardize the job at hand.

Sven had seen Liz as the crazed Thief who actively sought out mortal danger, and as a stupid self-centered hunter who could kick asses but wouldn’t give nor follow orders—only another Griever could reason with her. In other words, she’d make either a terrifying foe or a catastrophic ally.

And so, he called out to the group at large, “Gather ’round. We’re making a plan.”

At first glance, a slime was easily mistaken for a puddle. They were highly viscous monsters that lived in humid environments; they had no muscle, no bone, and no blood. As much as they didn’t look like so, slimes seemed to be somehow sentient: they slid slowly on the ground, catching and digesting small bugs with their bodies.

Slimes were magical creatures that could exist naturally but were also known to be generated by Alchemists. Yet despite them being magical creatures, Sven had always considered them unworthy of even a second thought—they could barely even be considered a monster. Slimes were terribly weak to both physical and magic attacks. In fact, their liquid structures were so very frail that they were easily split by a human with one swipe of a finger. And once a slime split, only the half containing its core would remain operational, leaving the other half a literal puddle.

While slimes were acidic enough to digest small insects and the like, they wouldn’t pose any threat to a human even if slimes swallowed them whole. And indeed, slimes were so weak that even normies considered them to be harmless. Frankly, treasure hunters, who had nearly superhuman strength, would find it a challenge to lose to a slime even if they tried. And that was why some hunters didn’t even consider slimes to be monsters.

Sven stood looking over his fellow hunters, who were armed and seated in a circle. “Has anyone here fought a slime before?”

“Nope.”

“No.”

“Never.”

“You don’t really *fight* them...do you?”

“I’ve accidentally stepped on one before...”

Sven frowned at the dismayed hunters.

The members of Obsidian Cross had fought monsters and phantoms of all shapes and sizes, more so than most of the other parties gathered here, and yet they’d never “fought” a slime.

But slimes weren’t all identical either. Sven had heard rumors of a bizarre treasure vault in the far east that only spawned slimes—even slimes powerful enough to kill hunters. Until today, those slimes seemed to only exist in the realm of rumors.

Scratching his head, Sven let out a long sigh and said, “Slime, of all things... I’d rather take on a dragon.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far,” jokingly interjected one of the hunters.

Sven wasn’t laughing. With thorough preparation and willingness to risk their lives, the Crosses had once fought and won a bitter victory over a dragon but not over a slime. To put it simply, Sven had no clue what to expect; he couldn’t even guess how this bizarre slime would attack, what its weaknesses were, or how he could gain an edge over it in battle.

He closed his eyes and waited a few seconds before saying, “Anyone wanna suggest a way to deal with this slime?”

Around the circle, the hunters responded with utter seriousness.

“My usual sword. Since cuts do well against them.”

“Brought my hammer. Heard blunt impacts do well too. I’ll crush its core.”

“Our Magus’s fire magic will fry it up.”

“It won’t stand a chance against my wind magic.”

“Bought a can of slime-repellent; 700 gild, available over the counter. Not sure if it works though...”

“I’ll crush it with my shield.”

Of course, their responses did nothing to quell Sven’s concerns. The slime-repellent aside, *everything* could deal with slimes. Likewise, Sven’s bow and arrow wasn’t always the easiest remedy for slimes, but shooting through their cores would get the job done at any rate. With his superb skills, Sven could shoot a hundred slimes in their cores without fail no matter how small they were.

“Did Krai say anything else?” asked Sven. There wasn’t enough information for him to work with, and Krai had a long track record of leaving out crucial information.

Sitting third to Sven’s left, Lyle answered pathetically, “Just that it’s not a normal slime...”

“Dammit, I knew that!” snapped Sven. “Why does he *always* have to drip-feed information?! Every! Damn! Time!”

“We asked him, but he just says he doesn’t know...”

This was Krai’s go-to tactic. And what’s worse, he really looked like he didn’t know. Sven had to admit: his clan master had a stone-cold poker face.

Silence befell the hunters.

Then, Gein spoke up from the edge of the circle in a mocking tone, “This is stupid! We aren’t gonna contemplate the slime to death. I don’t care if your CM can ‘see the future’ or whatever—we’ve got the manpower now, and we’ve got a job to do. If you bunch are too chicken to do it, we’ll take care of the slime—if it ever shows.”

The First Steps hunters remained silent and just turned to Gein with pitying looks.

Gein had expected some pushback, especially from these hunters who must have pride in their work. At this unexpected response, Gein twitched his cheek.

“Wh-Why are you looking at me like that?!”

“Don’t you get it? We all think you’ll be the first casualty,” said Sven. “Just know that I’ve tried to stop you; I’ve tried. Don’t come back to haunt me, all right? And...don’t die in vain. At least pass on some info on the thing. We’ll avenge your death.”

“You’re all nuts!” said Gein. “What are you going to do if *nothing* happens after all?!”

Sven ignored the question and returned his attention to the Steps hunters. At the end of the day, each hunter was responsible for their own actions and life. Sven had always striven to minimize hunter casualties on any quest, but he was ready to accept that a sacrifice may be necessary in this case to gain information on the target.

“No concrete idea then,” said Sven. “Then let’s—”

As he was about to continue, Sven spotted a small hand raised along the outer edge of their circle. Another large hunter was obscuring the owner of the hand, but when he noticed Sven looking in his direction, he moved aside to reveal a timid-looking girl behind him.

The girl looked rather reserved. Her eyes were concealed deep within her hood, but still, flickers of crimson shone from glimpses of her hair and eyes. Interestingly, she wore a pair of glasses—an apparel uncommon for hunters—with a thick rim.

Sven didn’t recognize the girl who must’ve been his clanmate.

“What is it?” he asked her.

The girl shook as if the question had stung her before quietly answering, “I’m Talia... Talia Widman, an Alchemist.”

“Alchemist?!” repeated Sven. “I didn’t realize we had another Alchemist in our clan but Sitri.”

Sven’s reaction made Talia shrink further into her hood.



Alchemists specialized in manipulating material through a combination of science and magic. They were usually a powerful asset to any party or clan. But a good Alchemist required vast knowledge and deep pockets, making them rarer still among hunters than Archers. Most of them were contracted to national academic institutions or trading companies that handled chemicals, and Sitri, the infamous Alchemist of Grieving Souls, was definitely the exception.

“I’m still a Level 3...” said Talia, with such little confidence for a hunter. “Sitri and I are the only Alchemists in the clan. We’re usually in the lab together...”

She would look more at home at a library than at a treasure vault. But then, Sven couldn’t think of anyone who could aid them better in this quest. Slimes were among Alchemists’ specialties after all, and that was why Talia spoke up.

A girl similar in age to Talia—most likely a party mate of hers—was patting Talia’s shoulder as if to encourage her. She didn’t look all that imposing, but her level indicated that she could handle herself in the field at the bare minimum.

Sven wondered if all Alchemists were oddballs. He was beginning to see a pattern between Sitri and Talia. But that didn’t matter—Sven was desperate.

“Alchemy is...a mix of science and magic...” continued Talia. “It’s...a vast field of study. Slimes and other magical creatures are a part of that.” Still very nervous, she went on and said, “Um...slimes aren’t the most popular subject of study, but Sitri and I had been researching them until very recently—”

“Studying slimes, you say? Any weakness?” asked Sven, forcing himself to sound optimistic. *The situation has taken a turn for the better. But did Krai plan all of this?* he thought for a brief moment.

Either way, this was a much-needed bout of good luck.

From a potion pouch twice the size of the average pouch worn by hunters, Talia carefully produced a glass cylinder. Within it, a dark-colored liquid slightly swirled.

Talia’s eyes widened behind her glasses, and her breathing hastened. “This chemical kills slimes,” she said. “It won’t work on any other monster—but it will kill ninety-nine percent of anything categorized as a slime.”

Quiet cheers came from the battalion. This was exactly what they’d been hoping for.

Sven was amazed by the chemical at first, but he soon frowned as he observed the cylinder once again.

“That is impressive...” he said. *But is it safe?* he wondered.

He'd never heard of a chemical that killed only slimes. And to begin with, why would she have something like that especially when slimes could be killed with just about anything? Besides, Krai had only announced that their target was a slime mere hours ago—it didn't seem plausible that Talia could've concocted this chemical in just that amount of time. Also, their target was no ordinary slime, or so Sven had been told. It all seemed too convenient, especially since Talia was a Level 3; she was still very green compared to Sven. If she had been Sitri, Sven might have felt differently. Sitri was a perfectionist. In fact, she was perfect at her craft. Despite her now low level, Sitri's prowess was well-known to most in the clan through the occasional potions she handed out. But ultimately, Sven didn't trust Talia's abilities enough to make her potion the ace up his sleeve. And by their looks, the other hunters shared Sven's sentiment.

Talia chuckled, and spoke with confidence this time, "Don't worry, Sven. I didn't make this—Sitri did. I've only asked for a vial so I can study it further. She said she'd pay a billion gild for any slime that this doesn't work on."

Through their careers of hunting monsters and phantoms, members of Obsidian Cross were often praised for their bravery. Despite that, Sven Anger always thought the true key to his party's success lay in their carefulness. The Crosses were strong, but not so when compared to the other insanely powerful parties of their generation: namely Grieving Souls and Ark Brave. While those parties had blown through every obstacle in their path with raw power and talent, Obsidian Cross managed to barely keep up with them only through careful decision-making. If the strength of Grieving Souls lay in their fearlessness of death, the strength of Obsidian Cross lay in the exact opposite.

The Crosses had vanquished many powerful foes through the kind of meticulous preparation they'd displayed today: deciphering Krai's cryptic foresight, spending a small fortune on Sounding Stones just to stay on top of the intel, and forming detailed plans when working with other parties. While their process was the polar opposite of how normies imagined hunters to operate, it was undeniably professional.

Standing before the entrance to White Wolf's Den, the hunters were wrapping up their preparations for the charge. And in the center stood the members of Obsidian Cross, charged with commanding the entire battalion.

The Crosses were clothed in their namesake—obsidian armor crafted with cutting-edge technology. Resilient against both blunt impact and magic, obsidian was supposedly the material most similar to that of Relics.

Sven's highly trained muscles shook under his armor—not from

fear but from the anticipation of the challenge ahead. Sven never suffered from delusions of grandeur in his abilities. Sure, he was a highly skilled hunter with a moniker, but he had no ability like Krai's precognition nor strength to single-handedly decimate an entire army like Ark's. Regardless, he was a hunter to the core.

In total, twelve parties had congregated outside White Wolf's Den. And with an average party-size of six, there were less than a hundred of them there. That wasn't an impressive number for a military battalion, but every one of them was a hunter trained by the treasure vaults. Their experience spoke louder than numbers, especially with several of them wielding Relics as their weapons. Yet not one of them had let their guard down—First Steps hunters knew full well the perilousness Thousand Trials could bring while the rest were afflicted by the intensity of the Steps hunters.

Being a cavernous vault, White Wolf's Den was particularly ill-suited for large battalions trying to march straight in with all swords blazing. In fact, the same went for many other treasure vaults, and that very property had shaped many of the treasure-hunting industry's standard operating procedures.

Sven's plan was simple—in fact, he didn't have much choice.

The parties would disperse and clear the vault with utmost caution. Each party would be designated to investigate a specific area.

Meanwhile, parties would communicate through whistles. By blowing their whistles a certain number of times in a row, hunters would be able to send different messages throughout the cave. An alarm would be sounded in case of any unexpected event, and the battalion would evacuate the vault to regroup.

And if anyone found the slime, they were to try to lure it outside if possible, where the entire battalion could take it on together. Even when no discoveries were made, the parties would reconvene outside the vault at scheduled times. If any hunter failed to return on time, they would be presumed dead, killed before they had a chance to blow their whistle. While each party would still be at risk of being taken out in the vault, Sven hoped to avoid the worst-case scenario where the mysterious slime wiped out the entire battalion at once.

Parties not entering the vault would remain outside as backup, guarding the entrance all the while of course.

This elaborate plan might seem unbelievably disciplined for a mishmash of parties, but it was laid out assuming that they'd be in for the long haul.

They couldn't risk it especially when they had no information on the target to speak of.

Guess we're lucky to know about the slime at all, thought Sven. *We can brace ourselves now at least.*

Sven clicked his tongue again and glowered at the treasure vault. “Trial this and Trial that... Damn you, Krai, for leaving us in charge of this. I’m gonna kick his ass when we get back.”

“Nah. You’re too scared of the Stifled Shadow to do that,” said one of his party members.

“Shut up. How am I supposed to hit her with a normal arrow? I’m doomed in that matchup,” snarled Sven.

With the vial of slime-killer in hand, Talia stood by with her party at some distance away from the vault entrance. She struggled to control her breathing; she was nervous, even though she was only the backup plan. If the target really was a slime, any of these hunters should be able to eliminate it without issue. They’d break the vial only if they ran out of other options.

What Alchemists lacked in combat strength, they made up for in their ability to solve problems with thorough preparations. And so, knowing Sitri well, Sven trusted Sitri’s product to get the job done.

Meanwhile, Henrik approached him and said, “Uh...who’s Sitri? Sounded like everyone knows her.”

“Oh, you haven’t met her yet...” said Sven.

When Henrik had joined Obsidian Cross half a year ago, Grieving Souls had already been the top dog. Renowned hunters often wore multiple hats, but none wore more than the brilliant Alchemist, Sitri, did. She’d been so busy that people seldom encountered her in the clan house lounge anymore, and they gradually stopped talking about her.

“She barely comes out nowadays,” reminisced Marietta the Magus. But hidden deep under her gaze, a hint of fear flickered.

Adoration and fear came hand in hand to those with extraordinary abilities. Sven received looks of both on a daily basis, and he assumed his party members had experienced the same. Sitri Smart was no exception: she had the kind of talent that everyone—even the extremely talented Alchemists of the capital—couldn’t help but envy.

Sven met Henrik’s timid gaze. The reserved look in his eyes somewhat overlapped with Sitri’s gaze in his memory. Sven held his breath for a moment before frowning.

“In short, Sitri’s...a *strong* weakling.”

“A *strong* weakling...?” echoed Henrik.

Sitri was strong. Brilliant. Talented. And above all, she was so peculiar that no one truly understood her. To all appearances, she was a friendly girl, but all who interacted with her couldn’t suppress a nagging feeling about her.

But now that Sitri had fallen from grace, First Steps members had stopped mentioning her in conversation as if they wanted to forget her entirely. As a result, now some members of the clan, like Henrik,

hadn't even heard of her at all.

Sven gazed in Talia's direction, and he said, "Several parties, including ours, were persuaded by Sitri to help establish First Steps. You know, she once was the second highest in level among the Grievors, after only Krai."

"Sven, we're ready," called Lyle.

"Got it," answered Sven, taking a step forward. "We'll continue this conversation later."

Sven took in the sight of his fellow First Steps hunters, and none of them were afraid of what lay in the cave ahead. Every one of these highly capable hunters were ready to fight.

There was a reason First Steps boasted a high average level of its members: the weak had long been culled; cowards had fled the clan before long. Everyone who remained was an elite annealed by a series of trials.

Surviving those battles had made them comrades, and that camaraderie was what was giving them strength now. The top-ranking parties, state-of-the-art facilities, well-organized structure, etc., of the clan were all just icing on the First Steps cake. What truly made First Steps a force to be reckoned with were the bonds, grown from surviving trials together, between its members. And this history was symbolized in the clan's name—these steps they took together were their pride, something worth risking their lives for. And this sense of pride extended also to all the other outside hunters involved here today.

Sven took a deep breath. "Focus up!" he boomed. "Trample this place! Leave behind our footprints! Everyone's gonna make it out of here alive and tell that dumbass CM of ours this was a piece of cake!"

Explosive roars from the hunters shook the surrounding woods. Steps or otherwise, all hunters shouted until their voices went hoarse as they flooded into the treasure vault to begin their invasion.

"The time has come, and we have made it," said Noctus.

All members of his research team save for Sophia were present. They'd left the lab underneath White Wolf's Den in favor of this place. Here was a fruit of their research—a defense system programmed to protect Noctus's team.

Their new location was easy to defend and offered a way out if things went south. Combined with Noctus's spell to project images from a faraway location, a catastrophic loss as they'd initially feared was no longer likely to happen.

Full of confidence, Sophia's voice came through the Sounding Stone atop the table, saying, "Your experiments are powerful, Master.

Now that we've had a chance to prepare, there's not even a one-in-a-million chance that we'll lose."

Designed by Noctus and Sophia, the defense systems were a revolutionary breakthrough, a top-tier invention even among the entire Akashic Tower catalog.

Noctus showed confidence in condoning Sophia's decision to strike. The other researchers did not protest because they, too, knew full well the capabilities of the defense systems.

"Nearly a hundred hunters, some of them even with monikers," continued Sophia composedly. "We're outnumbered, but that shouldn't be an issue. Taking on this many hunters at once will help accredit the research—this is a golden opportunity."

The other apprentices only glared at the Sounding Stone with detest.

"So what will be your first move?" asked Noctus.

With all of their ears on the Sounding Stone, Sophia went on to calmly describe her plan.

A significant time had passed without a single whistle being blown to indicate an emergency.

Sven had a map of the vault open on the ground as he took reports of the investigation parties. As a relatively easy treasure vault, a detailed map of White Wolf's Den was easy to come by. Sven marked off areas of the vault as the areas were cleared.

Their careful approach had slowed their progress, but seventy percent of the labyrinth was already marked.

"Nothing new, huh?" asked Sven.

"The phantoms are still high-level, but that's about it," answered a fellow hunter.

After fearing the worst, Obsidian Cross returned to the surface without any casualties. There were a few injured among the entire battalion, but none had died; even the injured should be healed by now.

Now, even the boss room, which they'd been warned was the most likely place for the slime to appear, had already been checked off of the map. Sven had reminded the party in charge of investigating the boss room to pay particular attention, but apparently there was nothing there to document either.

The remaining thirty percent of the vault was dead ends. In a few hours, they would've fully traversed the vault.

Most of their initial sense of danger had already dissipated. But Sven, of course, knew the usual *modus operandi* of the Thousand Tricks: things usually went down in his Trials when they least

expected it. And so he kept his guard up, but the group couldn't remain that vigilant for long.

"Maybe Krai's precognition was a little blurry on this one," said Sven jokingly.

"What if nothing happens?" asked one of his party mates.

"We'll count ourselves lucky," said Sven.

As the investigation continued, some parties had begun to give dirty looks to members of Obsidian Cross. Sven understood that they'd draw some ridicule if he'd gotten them all riled up for nothing, but Henrik would always return the dirty looks in kind. Of course, there was nothing they could do about a few parties just having a laugh at their expense. They seemed to be biding their time until the rest of the vault was cleared, then they'd openly prosecute Sven.

Talia's party, as they hadn't gone into the treasure vault, was taking some heat along with Obsidian Cross. Sven felt some guilt for them, but he was confident in his decision.

"We're not done yet," he said.

"We would've been if it wasn't for you," said Gein, who'd been criticizing Sven's decisions at every turn.

With ear piercings and highlighted hair, Gein looked almost like a common thug. Still, he'd followed Sven's direction through moaning and grumbling. His entire party seemed to share his sentiment as they stared at Sven with animosity.

"Complain all you want later," said Sven. "You just got out of there. Take it easy."

Gein clicked his tongue. He appeared to be smothering the flame of his wrath. "I guess pray to your almighty CM who *isn't* even here," he spat and walked away with the rest of his party.

Sven understood his sentiment though. If the battalion hadn't taken on Sven's careful approach, they would've cleared the remainder of the vault by now, and they could be wrapping up their day at a bar *if* nothing had gone awry during the investigation.

Seeing that Gein had strayed from his party and into the bushes away from the vault, Sven called out to him, "Hey! Stay at your post!"

"What, I can't piss?! I'll be right back!" said Gein as he slapped his sword on his belt. "Taking a weapon with me too." Quickly, he disappeared into the woods.

Sven let out a long sigh.

Well, the rest of his party was still here, and it wasn't like Gein was going back into the vault either. And since he should also be aware that the surrounding area was dangerous, Sven could see no harm in it as long as Gein returned quickly.

"And...we never saw him again," jested Henrik.

A grin crept onto Sven's face as he said, "Be careful what you wish

for.”

Even though the newbie had been skeptical of the Thousand Tricks’s prediction at first, Henrik strangely became more comfortable with it as the Crosses’ position deteriorated.

Henrik gave an embarrassed chuckle. “I don’t know Krai very well, but I trust you with my life,” he told Sven.

“Let me pray to our brave CM that I don’t disappoint you then.”

Gein made his way through the woods, stomping on the thick underbrush.

He hadn’t expected the Crosses, whose leader even had a moniker, to be a bunch of cowards. Gein had a long career in treasure hunting. And though he hadn’t earned a moniker himself, he’d made a living as a hunter in the capital. He respected the Crosses for steadily climbing the ladder to greatness one step at a time despite not having flashy talents. But it was precisely that respect that fueled Gein’s fury towards the Crosses, so much that he couldn’t even pity them for their blind obedience. He couldn’t understand their faith in the words of a man with a career shorter than half of his, who hadn’t even bothered to show up to the front lines. If this supposed prophet had been the descendant of the famous Rodin, the subject of many legends, it would’ve been one thing. But Krai was an outsider who barely went into treasure vaults himself. And so no amount of justification from Sven could quell Gein’s outrage.

He called the appearance of a treasure vault? wondered Gein. Not in a million years.

He’d sooner believe it was just an innocent outing that had just so happened to bring Sven and the others to the wrong place at the wrong time.

Gein had heard many accolades of Grieving Souls. But still, he couldn’t understand how that pathetic-looking Krai was their leader and was even considered to be on an equal footing as *the* Ark Rodin. Gein expected Krai to crack sooner or later and reveal his true colors—a mere mortal like him couldn’t possibly foretell events in distant treasure vaults while sitting pretty in the capital.

White Wolf’s Den was surrounded by dense forestry. Waist-high underbrush made it very difficult for hunters to traverse, and the thick branches shaded most of the daylight. Monsters occasionally appeared in these woods, but there couldn’t be sustainable populations of them this close to a treasure vault. Powerful monsters didn’t appear near the capital anyway.

He thinks there are slimes somewhere in these woods? thought Gein. The very idea of this was so outlandish that it couldn’t even pass as a joke.

Gein made his way through the quiet woods and put some

distance between himself and the treasure vault. Keeping one eye on his surroundings, he answered nature's call.

He was beginning to wonder if the recent activities in White Wolf's Den really were indications of abnormalities. Though, while he wouldn't be paid less for the lack of evidence, Gein had expected to find at least something. It was rare to not find any clue about the cause after such a thorough investigation.

If nothing turns up, thought Gein, even that stubborn Stormstrike will have to admit his mistake.

Then, a faint growl came from deep in the woods, so faint that it was nearly drowned in the ambience of leaves rustling. Only hunters whose senses of hearing had been enhanced by mana material could've picked up on it.

Wolf knight, thought Gein. This one has got out of the vault, I guess. Better take care of it to be safe.

Technically, White Wolf's Den encompassed the cave itself and its surrounding area. Before entering the vault, Gein and the other hunters had taken out most of the phantoms in the area so they could set up camp. Still, it was possible that new phantoms had spawned. Gein double-checked that his whistle was ready to use, and he drew his sword as he carefully made his way towards the source of the sound.

What was that sound?

Gein frowned. He'd heard plenty of wolf knights howl and growl during the investigation, but this sound from the woods was unfamiliar to him. In it, Gein had sensed anger, fear, sorrow, and anguish—whatever had made that sound wasn't all right.

Then, Gein came to an abrupt opening in the woods. Shocked by what he saw, Gein ducked behind a tree and peered around it.

Out there was a silver-furred wolf knight, the variant more powerful than its crimson-furred counterparts. Gein and his party had encountered one in the vault, and they'd dubbed it Moon Knight. But this one before him now was shackled at its neck and limbs, and its snout was muzzled. Chains wrapped around its torso and led into the ground. The wolf knight was shifting in vain in an attempt to free itself.

Beside the phantom stood two men dressed in black robes; each of them held a staff that signified that they were Magi.

"Are we sure this is the best opening move for us?" asked one of them to the other. "We're dealing with almost a hundred hunters."

"That damned experiment maniac. She can barely use magic and doesn't have the guts to get her own hands dirty. Just because she's the teacher's pet doesn't mean she owns us. 'Failure is not an option.' As if we need *her* to tell us that!"

What are they talking about? wondered Gein. But whatever it was, it had to be sinister. Or why else would they have a *captive* phantom? *Are they causing the abnormalities in the vault?* That thought of that possibility made Gein shudder.

Magi were generally powerful. A well-trained Magus could blow a hunter of other classes out of the water when it came to sheer destructive power; therefore they were always welcomed to any party. Gein's party had one too, and so he knew their glaring weakness: it took time to cast magic. That's why any Magi in a hunting party had to be protected by hunters of other classes who could hold off potential threats until they charged up their magic. In other words, an unguarded Magus was a sitting duck.

Gein could only see the pair of Magi. He could take them both out before either of them could cast a spell. Neither of them seemed very experienced either; they clearly hadn't noticed Gein behind the tree.

"You have to concede that this serum is powerful. She might be the first to discover it, but *we'll* be the first to experiment with it," said one of the Magi.

The other snarled and said, "Forced transmogrification using mana material... Dammit, is this supposed to be some sort of charity from her?!"

"Let's get started already," said the first Magus. "Let's see what her *breakthrough* is all about."

I'll have to strike fast once I see an opening, thought Gein.

Not only did they outnumber him, but the fact that the pair of Magi stood alone in the presence of a wolf knight, albeit constrained, indicated their confidence in their own abilities. Surely they must've taken in some mana material regardless of if they seemed inexperienced or not.

But I can't kill them, Gein told himself.

While this situation was as incriminatory to the Magi as it could get, he couldn't just kill them without getting the full picture out of them.

His mouth went dry from the growing tension. Gein had decided: his opening would be when the Magi looked away from his direction. The wolf knight shouldn't pose any threat anyway.

And soon, his moment came.

One of the Magi produced a syringe as large as his forearm, and both men turned their attention to the phantom.

Instantly, Gein leaped out from behind the tree, closing in on the Magi. He was a few steps away from them.

The wolf knight shook.

By the time one of the Magi finally turned to him, Gein's sword was already in the air.

“Wh-Who are you?!”

“A hunter!” spat Gein.

The Magus raised his staff in defense, and Gein’s sword clashed against it. Gein frowned at the unexpected result, but he didn’t hesitate and kicked the Magus’s unguarded abdomen. The kick was too powerful for the less physically trained Magus, and he went flying then rolling on the ground.

With that, Gein turned his attention to his other foe.

Despite being confused by the ambush, the other Magus was already pointing his staff at Gein with five burning arrows floating around it.

I barely gave them a second, and he’s already got a spell going?! thought Gein. He shuddered at the sight of the spell.

While this was a novice spell, it took long and hard training for Magi to learn how to cast even a simple spell on reflex alone. Apparently, Gein’s enemy was even more skilled a spell caster than he’d thought.

So Gein made a split-second decision: he charged at the blazing arrows, guarding his face with his left arm.

If he’d kept his distance from the spell, it would’ve given the Magus breathing room to fire more powerful spells. That would’ve wasted Gein’s advantage of the element of surprise.

An arrow, originally aimed at his head, struck him on his arm. While his wrist guard prevented the fire arrows from charring his arm, searing pain shot through it. Still, Gein’s gambit had worked.

Gein tackled the Magus and sent him flying back with a scream. Then, he turned to the first Magus, who was still lying on the ground, and kicked him again.

Casting spells required deep concentration, and Gein knew that. As long as he could continue disrupting the Magi’s concentration by inflicting pain on them, they could only cast drastically less effective spells, if at all. As a Swordsman whose job was to tank attacks for his party, Gein could withstand those spells.

Through his heavy breathing, Gein cursed at the Magi, “That freaking hurt! You’ll pay for *this*!”

He inspected his left wrist guard, which was now visibly singed. Gein curated each piece of his armor carefully, and his wrist guard offered some defense against magic. Only a first-rate Magus could’ve damaged it this much with a novice spell.

“Your spells might be good, but you’re a third-rate fighter!” said Gein.

Physically, Gein was in worse shape than either Magus, but he’d won the fight.

Kicking their staffs far away from the Magi on the ground, Gein

assessed his foes. He might've broken a rib or two on them, but the Magi were definitely still conscious and could answer questions.

Now I just have to request backup from Sven. Judging from that convo, these two gotta have decent intel. What a score!

"Talk! Tell me everything," demanded Gein.

"You're...part of the investigation," said one of the Magi. "How did you find us? Could it be the Thousand Tricks again?!"

"That makes no sense!" shouted Gein. "He's not coming! You're flat on the ground right now because of me! Not anyone else!"

Can everyone stop talking about the Thousand Tricks?! What's so impressive about him?

Gein kicked each Magus once more for good measure before tying them up with the rope he carried with him. And once he was done, he wore a fervent grimace. Below him, one of the Magi matched his expression by curling his lips. Then Gein heard a painful growl from behind him, so he snapped around to see what that was about.

"It's just like Sophia has said: he's not here." The Magus chuckled through shallow breaths.

The giant syringe was sticking out of the gap in the wolf knight's wrist guard. At least half of its content was already injected into the phantom.

An eerie feeling ran down Gein's spine at that sight.

Injecting a phantom? What kind of serum is that? What kind of "experiment" are these two idiots running anyway?

Gein glared at the two on the ground, but the Magi only returned cruel smiles.

"What did you do?!" asked Gein.

A heavy snap.

The sound of metal smacking the ground boomed.

Gein turned.

The chain was no longer constraining the wolf knight but spooled on the ground. Its muzzle flew off in pieces, followed by its shackles. It was as if they couldn't withstand an invisible force tearing them off the phantom.

Inspiring more fear in Gein than the chains on the ground, however, was the wolf knight's looks: Its head, adorned with the half-skull mask, was *melting*, as was its entire body that was covered in black metal armor. Its coat of wiry fur had been completely liquefied, resembling the oily coating of an amphibian. From its disfigured body, melted flesh dripped onto the ground. Its glowing eyes—the only feature resembling that of its original form—stayed affixed on Gein. When it lifted its ooze of an arm, the air around it blurred like a heat haze. Gein wondered if anyone would recognize the thing as a wolf knight in its current form.

What is...this thing?!

Gein had fought plenty of hideous monsters during his career, but he'd never encountered anything like this.

"Forcibly transmogrified phantoms seek out mana material in high densities," said one of the Magi who chuckled. "Who among us do you think has taken in the most mana material?"

Gein stopped listening, his mind preoccupied with visceral confusion and fear. With its body and armor continuously melting into itself, the phantom was beginning to resemble something that didn't belong here: a slime.

Gein's instinct for self-preservation drove his body to move. With his eyes still glued to the monstrosity that used to be a wolf knight, he jerked backwards. Without realizing it, he'd reached for his whistle.

"This can't be happening... Only if I had charged a second earlier..."

The whistle blow cut through the silence of the woods.

Sven Anger snapped his head up at the faint sound coming from the woods.

"A whistle!"

As a master sniper, Sven possessed senses more reliable than most hunters. But even he wouldn't have heard the alarm had he not been on guard out of apprehension for the current situation.

"Really?" asked Henrik in disbelief.

With his bow in hand, Sven rose to his feet. His movements drew the attention of the other resting parties.

"Everyone on guard!" he called out loudly. "Recall everyone in the vault. Now! *One* whistle! *One!*" One short whistle signified an emergency.

The hunters immediately leaped into action, taking their cue from Sven.

From his experience surviving countless life-or-death predicaments, Sven knew a split-second decision could make the difference between life and death in situations like this.

Talia held on tight to the slime-killer, bracing herself for what was to come.

"Hey, is Gein back yet?!" asked Sven.

"N-Not yet!" answered one of his party mates, pale in the face. Gein was the only one unaccounted for at the moment.

Sven bit his lips. *I shouldn't have let him go alone. What has happened to him?*

Then he heard a peculiar howl reminiscent of—yet unmistakably distinct from—a wolf knight's. No one but Sven had heard the whistle,

but the howl was close enough for all hunters to hear.

Finally, thought Sven.

Now that the search through the treasure vault was mostly complete, many hunters were ready at the base. With their number, they should be able to handle whatever was in the woods.

Soon the earth rumbled, and they could hear trees falling in the woods.

"We're sending a scouting party," said Sven. "We're rescuing Gein!" Their personal conflicts aside, Gein was still an ally on the same job.

At Sven's call, the scouts of each party approached him. But just as Sven was about to give directions, Gein emerged from the woods. Dread had drained the color from his face, his eyes wide and red. Blood flowed freely from the right hand he clutched in his left.

The Thief from Gein's party ran towards him.

Sven wondered what could've happened in the quarter hour or so since Gein had gone into the woods.

"It's an abomination!" shouted Gein hoarsely. "A slime! The Thousand Tricks was right!"

Just as he'd spoken, the trees imploded behind him. And with it, the ground shook again. From the opening, a creature nothing short of an abomination emerged.

"What...*is* that?" muttered Marietta, dumbfounded. "Is that...a slime?"

Even the members of Obsidian Cross had never encountered an enemy like this. The abomination was a blob of flesh, spotted in black and white. It stood taller than Sven; its exoskeleton was melted in sludge. While its outline still resembled something with four limbs, it was clumsily dragging its feet along the ground to move. Its crimson eyes, brightly shining through the goo, were the only sign of its sentience. In any case, the thing was pursuing Gein like a tidal wave of oozing flesh with no regard for the trees and underbrush in its path. It wasn't difficult for the hunters to imagine their fate should the thing catch them.

That's a slime?! Sven couldn't help but take another deliberate look at the blob.

If he were to describe it, the description might have resembled that of a slime, but then the approaching blob was far too heinous-looking to be called one. The phrase "counterfeit life-form" came to Sven's mind immediately for whatever reason. He could hardly believe that the Thousand Tricks had described this abomination as a "slime."

"It's...melting?" said Talia, taking a step back in horror.

Its unexpected foulness halted Gein's party mates in their tracks on the way to rescue him and froze the Magi in place, who had their

staffs poised to attack.

Sven drew his bow and called out to his allies, “Don’t stop! It moves slowly! Magi, get ready to blast it!”

Immediately, he aimed his bow at the thing. He’d practiced this very motion tens of thousands of times. Calculating distances to enemies and their rate of movement had become almost second nature for him by now, and there was no reason for him to miss a shot a mere thirty meters or so away.

Sven loosed his pitch-black arrow, and it tore through the air. The arrow shot past the Thief running up to Gein, past the faltering Gein himself, and crashed into the “slime’s” foot. As if being shot from a cannon, the impact blew its feet up, causing the vile creature to topple over.

Falling over, the oozing blob hit a nearby tree, and the trunk broke as if a giant pair of hands had torn it apart by force. Sven observed the mysterious effect—neither a physical nor magical strike—with astonishment.

Bubbles rose to the top of the blob of flesh and blood, and the faux slime rose again like nothing had happened.

Then the Magi unleashed their spells upon it in unison. At once, the faux slime was bombarded with high-speed bullets of water, unseen blades of wind, arrows of compressed light, and great balls of fire. The resulting cacophony of massive dust clouds filled the air after the impact.

Sven turned his attention to Gein, who was now being led towards him with the assistance of the Thief from his party. Gein’s expression was devoid of color and twisted in horror; his dirt-soiled armor plate rose up and down to his heavy breathing. What drew Sven’s attention, however, was Gein’s right arm, torn around the elbow.

“Henrik! Healing! Now!” he shouted.

“Right!” answered Henrik.

Gein’s arm hadn’t been cut. It looked like it had been twisted off with brute force. It wasn’t a fatal wound, but the blood loss would be unless they stemmed it soon. Swiftly, Henrik approached Gein and began casting a healing spell on the wound.

“What happened?!” demanded Sven.

Gein was panting. “Magi... They injected...the wolf knight... Slime... The Thousand Tricks...was right!”

A pale-green light emanated from Henrik’s palm, and it seeped into the gruesome wound. With that, the bleeding stopped, and Gein’s wound closed itself. Some life returned to his expression, indicating that his pain must have subsided considerably.

Henrik bit his lip and said, “Sven...! I can’t grow back his arm—”

“Do what you can! We’ll find his arm and put it back later!” said

Sven.

No one else from Obsidian Cross attempted to regrow Gein's limb. Henrik was their best Cleric; if even he'd failed, there'd be no point for the other members to try anyway. Though it wasn't hopeless—the best Clerics of the treasure-hunting world could regrow limbs. But now wasn't the time to seek one out. In any case, Gein was out of commission—how could a Swordsman carry on without his dominant arm?

"Fall back!" shouted Sven, and Gein leaped back, holding his upper right arm.

Sven had plenty of questions on his mind, but they'd have to make it out of here alive first before he could ask any of them.

As the dust cloud settled, an ear-piercing howl shook the woods.

One of the Magi who had been blasting the creature stood with his mouth agape. "It can't be...! All that magic, and it didn't leave even a scratch?"

In fact, the faux slime had not so much as budged. The bombardment of spells hadn't left a single mark, leaving the surface of the blob as reflective as it ever was.

None of the hunters dared to move. They were an army of frogs caught in a serpent's stare.

The Thousand Tricks originally planned to send the best hunter in the clan to deal with this thing. The thought popped up in Sven's mind, but he quickly shook it out of his head.

Pulling his bow tight, Sven shouted, "It has to be scathed somehow! Stay strong! Keep your distance and nail it from afar! And, Krai, how in the world is this thing a *slime*?!"

On his command, a rainbow of magic spells assaulted the faux slime. Adaptability was a key quality of hunters, and they were quickly adapting to the situation on hand: double the number of spells fired in the first round struck the blob from head to toe. An assault like this would've annihilated any other phantom in the vault, including the white wolf knight. Yet without showing so much as an inkling of dodging, the faux slime instead just shrieked where it stood. Slimes were supposed to be weak to all attacks, especially magic, and this onslaught should've obliterated any slime, faux or otherwise.

Another dust cloud rose and concealed the massive creature. And without waiting to confirm the outcome, another volley of magic was fired into the cloud. An explosion of light singed the air and sent a shock wave that Sven, ten meters away, had to brace against. After what seemed like an overkill of magic assault, silence returned to the area.

"Hey, Gein," called Sven, "did you say 'wolf knight' earlier?"

On the ground, Gein answered shakily, "Th-That's right! That

thing was a wolf knight! Those weirdos shot up the thing, and it started to...melt... Dammit!”

From the fading dust cloud emerged a towering and lopsided silhouette. The faux slime was still unharmed after taking the full force of the Magi, who’d been so sure of their victory. Now, their faces twisted in disbelief.

Marietta was no exception. And she said in disbelief, “No way... That should’ve eliminated any...wolf knight easy...”

What is that thing...? Sven shuddered.

Through his years in First Steps, Sven had gone through more Thousand Trials than he cared to remember, but still, he’d never seen anything as abhorrent as this. While the First Steps members had at least some experience with unexpected “Trials” like this, hunters from other clans, who were less experienced so, fell back in trepidation.

It has a high tolerance for magic...somehow? speculated Sven. *This is bad. We’re already losing the battle before the thing has done anything.*

Trembling, Gein extended his half arm towards the faux slime. “Look out! Don’t touch that thing! It’s...too strong! I’ve no idea what happened! I cut him! I did! Then my arm—the thing didn’t even *touch* me!”

There was an inhale. Then there was a gust of wind. Sven had fired an arrow, faster than anyone else could even follow with their eyes. Like a laser beam, the black arrow found the head of the faux slime. It was a shot only a true master of archery could’ve pulled off.

Henrik, who’d receded a few steps, was now sure of their victory. He’d seen Sven pierce dragon scale with his arrows. That squishy-looking slime—or whatever it was—didn’t stand a chance.

But just as the arrow was about to pierce the blob’s head—it *ricocheted*. Maintaining its momentum, the arrow reduced a tree a few meters away into a heap of kindling.

While the rest of the hunters stared in disbelief at the impossible outcome, Sven swiftly nocked his next arrow.

There’s no such thing as impossible, he reminded himself.

Sven had used to have absolute confidence in his arrows, but he’d learned from experience that unimaginable forces existed in this world. At the very least, there existed a Thief who could catch—with her bare hands—a hundred arrows flying at her simultaneously. Also there was a Paladin who didn’t bat an eye after taking hits from a hundred arrows. Compared to those, his arrow bouncing off a slime seemed perfectly ordinary.

His arm muscles tightened. One black arrow after another, he fired a total of ten shots, each capable of annihilating an ordinary phantom on its own. And just like his moniker, Stormstrike, the tempest of arrows broke upon the faux slime. The hunters watched as

he loosed the arrows, but they soon fell speechless—every single arrow was deflected right before it struck the faux slime, ricocheting all around the creature and tearing up grass and trees in its path. Had any human been along their trajectory, they would've also been torn apart.

Still, the faux slime remained undamaged.

As the hunters surrounded it, the blob held out its melting arms as if to inspect them.

“This isn’t happening,” grumbled Sven. “Physical negation? But magic didn’t work either. Did it put up some sort of barrier? No, those arrows didn’t look like they hit a barrier.” Rather than being blocked, it was more like the arrows had been forcibly parried.

Yet when it came to punching through defenses, Sven’s arrows were by far the most powerful option in the hunters’ arsenal. If neither his arrows nor the Magi’s spells could affect the thing, they were running out of options.

The faux slime bounced off the ground and propelled itself towards a section of the hunters encircling it. Screaming, those hunters in its path leaped out of its way. And as soon as they did, the faux slime struck the ground with both arms, erupting the earth on impact. Its strike was powerful enough to wound even the hunters here, who had all been already strengthened by their exposure to mana material.

The situation was looking worse and worse for the treasure hunters. Outnumbering the faux slime meant nothing if not even the monikered Level 6 hunter among them could leave a dent in the phantom.

“What do we do, Sven?!” asked Lyle.

“We’re not gonna run until we absolutely have to,” he answered without a second thought. “Gein told me someone was responsible for making this thing. Can’t just leave it like this.” It was a matter of hunter’s pride.

Lyle scratched his head and said, “Dammit, Krai. We might encounter ‘something like a slime’? I’ve had enough of his half-truths! I’m definitely giving him a piece of my mind when we get back.”

Sven curled his lips at the complaint. They were definitely not getting paid enough for this.

Another bounce. The faux slime had set its sights on another group of hunters. Yet for now, all they could do was buy time.

“Don’t let it come anywhere near you! It doesn’t move that fast,” commanded Sven. “If it comes for you, focus on getting out of range. Everyone else, slow it down! Every creature has a weakness, and we’re gonna find this one’s!”

Now he was grateful that Eva had vigilantly assembled this

battalion. Sven could hardly imagine how much worse their predicament would've been if their numbers were halved as Krai had suggested.

Sven put his focus on impeding the creature's movements. While all attacks so far had been deflected, the faux slime walked on its legs, and attacking them slowed down the thing for split seconds. Apparently, it couldn't move very precisely nor react sharply to attacks. As invincible as it seemed, the faux slime didn't seem to have much of a brain.

Sven turned to the others and encouraged them. "Its attack pattern is simple! It attacks those nearest to it. And it only tackles and swipes. This thing's so slow that it'll make you yawn. Stay in the game!"

With that, the hunters turned to the offense again. Countless spells were fired to slow the phantom, and the barrage of attack rammed into its mysterious barrier.

The faux slime might've posed a greater threat if it had enough brains to focus on attacking a single target rather than just whoever happened to be nearby. But even so, the hunters' situation wasn't improving: Magi couldn't fire spells forever, and they couldn't keep dodging forever either. If a hunter ran out of mana or stamina, they were out of the game. But phantoms were simply built differently from mere humans, so the longer the battle went, the worse off the hunters were.

As before, all of their attacks were deflected off the blob's surface. But the hunters still had an ace up their sleeve—Talia's slime-killer. Sven cast a glance at Talia at the outermost edge of the battalion; she seemed on the verge of fainting.

Sweat trickled down Sven's face. *One shot. That's all we get*, thought Sven. If the creature deflected the slime-killing potion, they were doomed. *We have to be careful about this.*

Meanwhile, he could see weariness creeping into his allies' expressions. While they were still dodging the faux slime's attacks at the moment, people could start getting hurt if the battle dragged out any longer.

Sven had made his decision. He'd worked out the faux slime's attack pattern. His plan was risky but doable.

Krai had initially requested Ark Rodin for this job. Sven knew he wasn't as skilled as the Argent Thunderstorm; nevertheless, he took pride in his work and his moniker.

Physically, he wasn't exhausted yet. Besides, his allies were risking their lives every time the faux slime attacked.

"Give me the potion, Talia," he said. "I'll do it."

"O-Okay!"

Talia faltered over to Sven and handed him the vial containing the dark-colored liquid. It was so frail that one impact would easily break the vial.

“If you can pour the solution onto it, the slime should self-destruct starting from the point of contact...it should,” explained Talia.

“Everyone, listen up! Get that piece of turd over here!”

Sven bolted. He’d seen the faux slime move enough times to know how and how fast it moved.

As he rapidly closed in, the creature switched its target from a hunter it’d been chasing to Sven.

For an instant, their eyes met. Engraved into the noseless, mouthless, melting face was a pair of eyes that still shone.

As if stooping, the massive blob compressed itself towards the ground.

Sven smirked.

Insanely freakish as the faux slime was, the thing didn’t recognize the hunters as foes but only as preys—it had no sense of danger. Sven would exploit its monotonous and unintelligent movement pattern to his advantage.

Once the faux slime could shrink no longer, it leaped into the air like an unleashed spring. But this time it sprang much faster than it had the entire time. While the other hunters watched with bated breath, Sven scoffed at the slime flying at him, rapidly eclipsing his vision of the sky.

Sven had expected as much; he knew it wouldn’t be as simple as throwing and hitting the slime to begin with. The thing had deflected arrows, spells, and even a rock he’d *gently* thrown at it. The same would naturally happen to a glass vial thrown its way. So Sven had a simple solution.

“You think we can’t handle this, Thousand Tricks?” he snarled.

The faux slime moved faster, but only faster than how slow it had been moving. Compared to the phantoms Obsidian Cross usually faced, the faux slime still moved at a snail’s pace.

As the faux slime came falling from the sky above, Sven crouched and moved as if he was gliding along the ground. The melted limbs failed to capture Sven, and it landed on the ground—right on top of the slime-killer he’d left behind as he dodged the faux slime.

Crack.

Indeed its barrier was powerful, but it wasn’t infallible either; it couldn’t protect its user from everything. Even Safety Rings, which were famous for their powerful barriers, could be circumvented by a skillful opponent. Having crushed the vial of slime-killer underneath it, the faux slime froze on the spot for a moment.

“Drop dead!” said Sven.

Every hunter there watched the blob with bated breath as it extended its arm towards Sven, who dodged it with plenty of time to spare. Then, the creature began moving again as if nothing had happened at all. Despite still molten, it was clearly moving more smoothly than it had been when it first appeared.

With quivering lips, Talia crumbled to the ground in despair.

Sven stomped the ground and shouted into the night air, “Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! I *knew* it wasn’t a slime!”

He had almost expected this after his years of experience in dealing with Krai. Obviously, this creature looked distinct from a slime, and Gein’s testimony backed that up as well.

Lyle, who’d sought Krai’s advice before they departed, recalled with horror, “N-Now that I think about it...Krai said it would be something *like* a slime—”

“I have enough of that bastard!” cried Sven. “Doesn’t he know the importance of giving accurate information?! We’re not Grievors who can plow through every threat with brute force! How many times does he have to almost kill us?!”

Lighter on its feet than before, the faux slime launched itself at Sven, who managed to move out of the way at the last second. He heard a wet impact on the ground behind him. The tension had made him break out in cold sweat.

“What the hell are we supposed to do with this?! This is on you, Krai! Fuck you!” continued Sven.

“K-Krai said we could handle it with half the hunters we have now...” added Lyle.

Defly avoiding the faux slime, Sven continued shouting, “I’ve had enough of his crap! I’m gonna kill him! He can get down here and take care of it himself!”

The Magi hurriedly resumed attacking, halting the creature for a moment with the blast of their spells so Sven could keep his distance from it. Some of those spells were advanced enough to vaporize several phantoms in one shot, yet they still had no effect on the faux slime. In fact, while the hunters were growing weary, the thing even seemed like it was moving faster and faster.

Sven couldn’t see a way out. His quiver was nearly empty too.

Then one of the First Steps hunters called out to him, “Sven, we can’t hold anymore! We have to retreat!”

What’s the correct call? contemplated Sven. They could easily run from the faux slime, but that would mean they would fail their quest. *And if we leave this abomination here, won’t it wreak havoc?* Sven frantically weighed his options as the faux slime sped up further.

Then, a jarringly calm voice rang through the area. “That’s a mana barrier,” said the voice as if giving an academic lecture.

Immediately, the hunters settled down from their frantic disorder at the sound of the voice. Contrary to Sven's call to battle, this voice brought about tranquility to the group. Part of the battalion parted to reveal the speaker as she leisurely strolled down the battlefield.

She wore a yellow-green robe, a large potion pouch on her waist, and a large backpack. Her vibrant pink hair blew in the wind. Time stood still. All hunters—and even the faux slime—froze where they stood as they beheld the intruder.

Once her glimmering pink eyes found Sven, she gave him a smile.

“Sitri...? What are you doing here?!” asked Sven.

It was Sitri Smart, the Level 2 Alchemist of Grieving Souls.

Innocently, Sitri put a finger on her lip in contemplation, displaying incredible fortitude without even batting an eye at the abomination that stood a short distance away.

Talia, a fellow Alchemist, stared at the girl in disbelief. Sitri wasn't supposed to be in the capital at the moment.

“Krai decided it was about time I took over the operation from him. I didn't want to intrude, but I couldn't very well just stand by and watch... I'm the best fit for this job. I believe I know what we're dealing with here.”

Her easy tone sent a shiver down Sven's spine.

Geniuses were often on a different plane than the rest of the world. But it was rare even among the eccentric population of treasure hunters to encounter someone as fatally deviant as Sitri was.

Sitri's supposed to be away from the capital, thought Sven. *Was he waiting for her return?*

The other First Steps members looked just as confused as Sven at her sudden appearance.

“Mana barrier...?!” asked Sven.

“Yes. I'm sure you know what it is: a barrier used by extremely powerful Magi and mythical beasts. It's often considered a sign of extraordinary strength,” answered Sitri.

Sven was aware of it. Mana barriers were utilized by creatures with exorbitant mana within them. By expelling mana from their entire body, users deflected any attacks against them—simple yet powerful. On the other hand, it was a show of brute magical force rather than a skill, as expending mana without channeling it into spells was extremely inefficient. Even the best of Magi could only maintain a mana barrier for a very short time.

Hearing that, Marietta let out a quiet exclamation of astonishment.

Observing the wobbling faux slime, Sitri continued matter-of-factly, “An excessive pool of mana circulates around this creature, creating a sort of vortex that deflects your arrows and any spell cast

against it. You won't find a phantom with this much mana even in a Level 8 treasure vault. Very curious, indeed. It's no wonder none of you realized what it was."

Suddenly, the faux slime charged at Sitri as if it'd snapped out of a trance. This time, it was homing in on Sitri, ignoring nearby hunters.

"A phantom with this much mana couldn't have materialized in this vault," noted Sitri. "And it's...dissolving? Mana material, which composes phantoms, is said to be the source of mana. It's an outlandish theory, but this can be explained if the phantom's mana material is being forcibly converted into mana."

No other hunter here would've arrived at that conclusion; it was said an Alchemist's weapon was their knowledge.

Sven recalled hearing how Sitri handled all the analysis of the treasure vaults that Grieving Souls ventured into. But regardless, there was no point in understanding the mechanism if they couldn't overcome it. Mana barriers were notoriously difficult to overcome because of their simplicity.

Sitri took a few steps to avoid the faux slime at the last second. Despite being charged by a creature much larger than her, she maintained her calm expression and analysis. Observing the creature's melting frame, Sitri walked in a circle around the thing as it followed her with its eyes.

"Most of its organs have dissolved. What's left is its instinct... Is it trying to recover its dissolved structure by taking in mana material? Are you coming after me because I have the most mana material out of everyone here? Poor thing... Even if you absorb me, you won't heal. This is a failed experiment."

"Get back, Sitri! You're not safe there!" called Sven. The Alchemist was physically the weakest class of them all.

"We need an attack, physical or magical, powerful enough to break through the mana barrier, or to simply wait until so much of its structure is converted to mana that it can't sustain its shape..." Sitri turned her head. "Thank you for your concern, Sven. Oh, I know! Why don't we use this?"

With that, Sitri produced a gray metal rod about a foot in length. The faux slime twisted in its track to charge at Sitri again. And without batting an eye, she threw the rod at it.

"That's anti-mana metal," she explained as the rod spun and then sank into the faux slime with incredible ease. The creature halted as if in surprise as Sitri moved out of the way to allow the others to strike. "Take it away, Sven."

Sitri had calculated where to pin the faux slime down. Sven could see the thing clearly with the anti-mana metal rod sticking out of its head. With the exhaustion already melted from his body, he fired an

arrow in a single breath.



The black arrow flew true to the rod—an all too easy target for Sven—and shattered it on impact, obliterating the faux slime's head with it. And with that, the faux slime vanished into thin air as if it had always been an illusion.

Considering all the trouble the hunters had gone through, this almost seemed too easy; everyone watched in silence.

For the first time since her arrival, Sitri showed emotion. She sighed in relief. "You're all right... I'm glad I made it in time."

"What...just happened?" muttered one of the hunters in disbelief.

Sitri had independently identified the enemy's weakness from the limited information and even solved the problem. While she hadn't technically delivered the finishing blow, Sitri's movements had been perfectly precise throughout.

Then, a carriage emerged from the woods. It was a carriage just as ornate as the ones used by First Steps. From within it, a figure climbed out.

"Is it finished, Sitri?"

Sven's eyes widened. "Branch Manager Gark?! Why are you here? Dressed like that no less?"

"He gave me a ride," said Sitri. "I'm not as good a runner as my sister."

His appearance stirred up the hunters. Gark had forgone his usual Association uniform for a set of polished deep-red armor. In one arm, he carried a horned helmet matching the rest of his armor, and in another, his halberd. Given Gark's physique, his supposed retirement from the front lines didn't sound quite convincing.

Following behind him, two scrawny men adorned with Vault Investigation Bureau uniforms timidly came out of the carriage.

"I've already explained this to Gark," said Sitri, turning to Sven, "but I shall go over it with you again. I'm confident in my grasp of the situation here and can identify the people responsible for this."

Having watched the entire exchange from his distant hideout through his surveillance system, Noctus was shaken.

"Who...is that?! She has the ability to destroy a transmogrified phantom with such ease? She must be the enemy Sophia has spoken of!"

The transmogrification serum was created by accident during an experiment. An accident it may be, a solution that forcibly converted mana material had incredible potential to produce results startlingly close to Noctus's main objective. While he hadn't thoroughly tested the serum, Noctus had observed that phantoms injected with the

serum would turn into self-decaying monstrosities that frantically search for more mana material. Consequently, the mana produced by the continuous conversion of mana material formed a natural barrier around the creature that protected it from all attacks. And this defensive power alone was enough to make these abominations a viable pawn in Noctus's scheme.

But Sitri had dealt with it so easily that Noctus couldn't help but recognize her extraordinary talent.

Anti-mana metal was a unique material that negated most effects of raw mana. The relatively flimsy material was unfit for weaponry. And as it didn't negate mana that was converted into magic spells, it was also often useless as armor. But as it happened, it was the perfect material when it came to breaking mana barriers—it was the silver bullet against transmogrified phantoms.

Noctus still had a plentiful supply of the serum, so losing the phantom wasn't an issue intrinsically. However, he'd expected the phantom to at least deal a significant blow to the hunter battalion or even outright wipe them out, and that was what had convinced Noctus to authorize the use of the untested serum. As it turned out, however, all that monster had destroyed was just a right arm of *one* of the hunters. And to add insult to injury, his two apprentices in charge of the operation had been beaten.

"How could this be...? Such precision in dealing with the thing... I have underestimated the hunters."

Noctus's forces could easily afford to lose a phantom, but the emotional blow to the researchers was palpable.

"May I be of assistance, Professor Noctus?" asked an apprentice Noctus had stationed nearby.

"Where is Sophia?" asked Noctus.

Bitterness crept into the apprentice's expression. "Sophia said that she was going to gather intel and test the defense system... She has yet to return."

"She surely walks at her own pace..."

"She did leave us with her strategy," noted the apprentice. "We shall wipe out those hunters."

Meanwhile, the rest of Noctus's apprentices congregated in the war room.

"Continuous deployment?! What is she thinking?!" exclaimed Flick, holding the strategy memo in his quivering hand.

They'd always been below Sophia in rank, but now they were forced by their master to follow her orders.

"She doesn't have a strategic bone in her, clearly. The hunters have already shown they can take out a transmogrified phantom with ease! Sending them in one at a time will just ensure they're all

eliminated. We don't have too much of the potion left either. Doesn't she get it?! We need to...launch an all-out attack."

"What will this accomplish...?" concurred another apprentice. "She's just an ivory-tower researcher after all."

Sophia was an excellent researcher, and even Flick had to admit she outperformed him in that regard. This order she'd left behind, however, was atrocious. Flick was a Magus trained in combat too; strategizing wasn't his best talent either, but he didn't have to be a master strategist to understand that her order was nonsensical. Meanwhile, even though Sophia had always been a thorn in Flick's side, he had no intention of going against his master by defying her command...until he saw how clueless she was.

"Have you reached her?" asked Flick.

"No luck... We even tried her Sounding Stone, but nothing worked."

"Dammit! Doesn't she understand how dire our situation is?! She's marching us straight into the pit of defeat!"

They were facing off against the Thousand Tricks *and* a Griever in the field.

How can we win if our useless commander isn't even here to assess our situation? thought Flick. Even the best of fighters were useless under inept command.

"Flick, the order was given before the first phantom was defeated. What's wrong with adapting to the situation? We just have to win. Even if the phantoms can't wipe out the hunters, we still have more weapons in our arsenal to do the job."

Flick frowned at the suggestion. He weighed his options, considering his master's order, their current situation, and Sophia's absurd command. And after a few seconds, he reached a conclusion.

"You're right. If we continue to follow her amateur commands and lose the battle, I won't be able to face Master out of shame. Grab all the potions we have and gather up the phantoms we've captured. We're going to annihilate those hunters once and for all!"

Chapter Five: The Prodigy

“Krai, I want to become the piece our party is missing.”

That was what Sitri had told me back when we were each still deciding what kind of treasure hunter we wanted to become. Even back then, she’d been—in contrast to her sister—quiet, kind, and brilliant.

“I’m not strong, so I was thinking, ‘That way, we can all stay together...’”

While the rest of them had chosen their roles based on what they wanted to do, Sitri had made her decision based on different criteria altogether. Liz had always run fast; Luke had seldom lost a fight; Ansem had always been dependable during tough times; and Lucia had always been able to cast a few basic spells. But Sitri had none of that—she didn’t have a noticeable talent. And that had shaped her thinking. Back when we weren’t even ten years old, Sitri had already been seeing the big picture better than any of us. She’d been basing her decision on what had been best for our party.

So, I’d patted her on the head and suggested, “What’s that one class? You like reading, Sitri, you know... The Alchemist! That’s the one.”

Only after a year had passed did I learn that Alchemists required exorbitant funds and profound knowledge to improve their craft and that it wasn’t even a class deemed suitable for treasure hunting. But by then, Sitri had already delved irreversibly deep into the trade. She just so happened to have a knack for the job, so much so that people had started calling her “The Prodigy.”

And so I owed her, even to this day. Even if I hadn’t, it was only natural that I’d wanted to help out a party mate who worked herself to the bone to serve the party (although it looked like she enjoyed it a lot).

In the clan master’s office, Sitri’s sister was clinging to me like a fly on honey. “Why does Siddy get to go but I don’t?! Why? Why? Why?!” she protested, endlessly whining into my eardrum.

I just nodded along, almost soothed by her droning. “Yeah... Uh-huh... You’re not going.”

And all the while, Tino spied on us from behind the safety of the couch.

“Krai, I want you to trust me and let me lead this quest!” Sitri had

requested out of the blue. Briefly, she'd explained to me that the changes in White Wolf's Den were possibly related to a case she'd been chasing for years. I didn't really understand what she was chasing, but apparently it wasn't treasure-hunting related. Even though I felt it was a shame that she had to be out on another job so soon after coming back, I wasn't going to refuse if she sounded so determined. I'd never wanted to lead this mission anyway. So with the brilliant Sitri taking the reins, I had nothing to complain about, and neither should the other hunters.

Wistfully, she'd added another request. "And, if possible...please don't let my sister run free-range." Her eyes had looked at me sorrowfully.

Purring, Liz plopped herself onto my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck. "Favoritism doesn't look good, Krai—which is unless you're favoring me. Am I not your favorite?"

A pleasant warmth spread into my lap. The sensation of her was so soft that I could hardly believe she could literally kill with those legs of hers. In her pale-ruby eyes, I saw my own stupid expression reflected. Were Eva to witness this, she'd see me as a scum for sure—if, by some miracle, she didn't already.

Why does Liz want to nose-dive into battle all the time? Just the thought of going into that vault makes me want to barf.

If I let Liz run free-range now, there was a real chance she'd be so wound up that she'd kill everyone in White Wolf's Den. To be honest, it's tough to say if even Sitri had what it takes to rein her in.

Now that I think about it, "free-range" is quite the derogatory way to describe it.

"Krai, don't leave me out, okay? Please?" continued Liz.

"If anything, I'm the one being left out," I said.

But on second thought, I had Tino. Surely she was still on my side, right? Though when I looked at her, she just turned the other way.

What gives?

"I'll be a good girl. I promise," pleaded Liz. "Siddy might get killed on her own! She's an *Alchemist*, the weakest of us all. If Killiam wasn't in maintenance, it'd be a different story—I'm worried, Krai. Can I go?" Liz was working another angle now. As if she was concerned for Sitri's safety at all.

Killiam was the "magical creature" Sitri usually toted around as her bodyguard. With a physique like a gray boulder, the hulking humanoid wore nothing but a bag with eye holes over its head and a bright-red banana hammock on its waist. To all appearances, Killiam was a highly disturbed human, but who was I to argue with Sitri when she called it a magical creature? As to what kind of magical creature it was, I hadn't the slightest idea... And I usually tried not to think too

hard about Killiam. Its name, by the way, was derived from the fact that it could only speak one word: “Kill.”

Maybe I’d find the thing less ridiculous if I were the kind of hunter who still takes on treasure vaults with my friends...

Still clinging to me, Liz breathed more saccharine words into my ear, “I wanna go, Krai. You don’t mind, do you? Pretty please... Just say yes! I’ll be a good girl, I swear!”

“No means no,” I said, not entertaining Liz’s childish tantrum.

Sitri had first come across Noctus’s work back when she still held the moniker “The Prodigy.” Primus Institute, the foremost authority of magical science and the frontier of new discoveries in Zebrudia, had taken an interest in Sitri’s unique research at the time and had granted her special permission to enter one of the forbidden libraries. Among its collections, she’d found the thesis “The Nature of Mana Material and the Potential of Treasure Vaults,” authored by Noctus Cochlear, the Master of Magi.

Hidden under its simple title, the thesis had outlined a dangerous idea that had earned the paper its place in the library inaccessible to most: the possibility of manipulating a treasure vault without altering its landscape through manipulating certain characteristics of mana material. Little testing had been documented in the paper, but with this knowledge, according to the proposed theory, one could do anything from destroying existing treasure vaults to rebuilding them all over again at minimal cost—feats unbound by mortal limitations.

Had a no-name Magus presented the same theory, they would’ve been laughed out of the Institute. The outlandishness of his thesis was the only thing that had kept Noctus’s punishment to a mere banishment from the empire despite him having committed one of the ten capital crimes; even the thesis itself had never been burned but only locked away.

Sitri’s experience as a treasure hunter had helped her recognize the danger of the topic presented in the paper. While a thesis was as good as a pipe dream, this had opened up the possibility of the dream becoming reality. But Sitri had known beyond a doubt that the author of the thesis would one day test his theory in real life. His lust for knowledge, pride, or perhaps his desire for revenge against the capital that had spit him out had been sure to drive Noctus to follow through with his experiment.

Sitri considered Noctus—banished or not—a colleague of hers at Primus Institute. Thus had begun Sitri Smart’s lonely fight.

Sitri's matter-of-fact retelling of her past discovery hushed the entire camp—it was too outlandish.

One of the Vault Investigation Bureau agents who'd arrived with Gark shouted, nearly foaming at the mouth, "Th-That's impossible! Noctus was permanently banished for touting his nonsense, never allowed to set foot in the capital again! And now you're talking about...Akashic Tower?!" And his gaze was as if asking Sitri another question, *Even if you're telling the truth, why are you investing so much time and effort into a thesis you just stumbled upon?* But the agent's doubt and fear didn't rattle Sitri in the slightest.

"I don't expect you to believe me," she said. "That's why I've been chasing the Master of Magi on my own. But take the recent anomalies in this treasure vault: that slimy thing from earlier must've been a byproduct of his experiments."

Truth is stranger than fiction, thought Sven. Can't verify what she just said without more to go on, but it makes sense. And if she's right, it's possible that they'll destroy every existing treasure vault. And that we'll have to prevent at all costs.

The other Alchemist in the group, Talia, with her crimson hair, timidly raised her hand and said, "So the device should be underground...right?"

"Yes," answered Sitri. "His theory requires a large device to produce the desired effect. But considering that the device is the crux of his research, I doubt we could find it now. Seeing how we had been fighting that monster, it looks like our opponents are already prepared for battle."

"What...?" said Talia, her crimson eyes widened.

Without addressing Talia any further, Sitri looked around the group of hunters. All of them could still fight, except for Gein.

"I'll interrogate the Magi whom Gein has captured," she said. "If that thing was a wolf knight forcibly transformed by a potion, I can imagine Akashic Tower has a follow-up attack prepared and is ready to strike."

Commotion stirred among the battalion in anticipation of an imminent wave of faux slimes that they'd have to contend with—just one of those monsters was already bad enough.

"B-But we can throw that rod at it...right?" asked Marietta. Some color had returned to her cheeks now that she was briefly rested.

"I'm sorry. But that was my only piece of anti-mana metal. I couldn't have imagined I'd encounter something like this..."

"Krai didn't tell you?" asked Lyle.

Sitri just cocked her head and said, "Tell me what?"

Looks like the Thousand Tricks keeps even his party members in the dark just as much as he keeps the rest of us, thought Sven.

Sven's arrow had already obliterated the baton that Sitri had thrown at the first faux slime. Perhaps they could find a fragment of it in the area, but Sven doubted that would be enough to take out another faux slime, let alone several more. Anti-mana metal was so seldom used that no one could've blamed Sitri for not carrying any more with her, whatever her original intention for the material might have been.

Seeing that dread had clouded over her fellow hunters, Sitri said, "But I feel confident that we can beat them. The barrier isn't perfect, and it won't last forever because it expends so much mana. I'll analyze how it works and find a way to beat it. With this many hunters together, it won't be too difficult." Sitri's calm encouragement seemed reassuring, especially when she'd defeated the first faux slime so easily. And she continued, "Although I can't lead like Krai, I will do the best I can. As an Alchemist, I don't have what it takes to fight on my own—I need all of your help."

Then she gave directions to the group, and they dispersed accordingly.

Watching Sitri go, Henrik exchanged a few words with Sven. "She's so mature about it," he said, his eyes alight with almost too much admiration for a hunter he'd just met.

"Huh...? Yeah, sure," said Sven.

"Who admits that they're powerless in a fight? A Cleric's far from the best class when it comes to combat, but you'll never hear me say that to a crowd."

"Like I've said, Sitri's a strong weakling."

"What...?"

Sven looked at the rookie with a sharp gaze and said, "Be careful, Henrik; don't get sucked into all that. Sitri's a tricky one. She *is* strong; has been for years, regardless of how she sees herself."

Truly, would someone so weak be chasing a heretic Magus on her own? Would someone so helpless be so calm in the face of that faux slime she'd never seen before? It didn't matter if it was technically Sven who took the shot to finish the faux slime. It didn't add up.

"Sitri thinks she can get away with anything because she's 'weak'; that she should always use all means at her disposal. There's more to her than meets the eye, Henrik. As far as I know, Sitri's just as freakish as the rest of the Grievors."

"Got it...!" said Henrik.

While the rest of the battalion rehydrated themselves and recovered their mana with potions, Gein and a few others returned with the two Magi responsible for creating the faux slime. Apparently, they were still on the ground. The Akashic Tower Magi fruitlessly flailed atop the shoulders of the mighty hunters bringing them in. Like

a pair of worms, they were dumped onto the ground, surrounded by the battalion. Though it'd cost him his right arm, Gein had struck big by detaining these Magi.

Sven looked at the pair on the ground: there were a tanned middle-aged man with dark hair and a man who looked like he hadn't seen the sun in months. While Sven had most of the wanted posters memorized, none of them depicted either of these Magi.

Sweat beading on his face, one of the Magi said, "Don't tell me you've defeated it...!"

"You work for Noctus Cochlear, don't you?" asked Sitri out of the blue.

Their expressions changed, and they were now staring at Sitri with their eyes wide open.

Sitri was so frail in stature that she almost looked childlike in comparison to the detained Magi. But their expressions twisted as they recognized Sitri, who smiled at them. Contrasted by the harrowed expression on the men, she almost seemed like a cat playing with her prey.

"My name is Sitri Smart," she started. "Answer my questions, and I'll make sure you both live. Where is the Master of Magi?"

"Ha! As if we aren't ready to lay down our lives! You'll never find where he is," said one of the Magi with a fierce grin, his eyes blazing with resolve.

A telltale sign of a hard nut to crack, observed Sven. Let's see how you go about it, Sitri.

"I see... Thank you," said Sitri cheerfully, putting her hands together. "Just wanted to confirm you really worked for him."

Is Sitri right about everything after all? wondered Sven, not that he had any reason to doubt Sitri's claim beyond the unlikelihood of its premise. Now, he saw similarities between her tactic and the Thousand Tricks's foresight in that they both extracted information from the slightest clues. So far he preferred Sitri's method as she offered some sort of explanation at least.

With the two captives quivering speechlessly on the ground, Sitri crouched down to their level and said, "Just so you know, I've been chasing you lot for a long time. Just didn't expect you to start things while I'm out on my day job. There's much about you I already know, and there are many preparations I've already made in anticipation. If possible, I want to avoid taking violent measures. So I'll ask you just one more time, 'Where is Noctus Cochlear?'"

Underneath her flawless smile, her eyes gleamed in demand for answers. Her smile looked so out of place in an interrogation. It drained the color from the faces of the captive Magi, but they still kept their lips tightly sealed.

“Pain isn’t my preferred tool of interrogation. So...I brought along with me a potion that I think will help loosen your lips a little.”

Snapping open the potion pouch on her belt, she produced a vial containing a lavender-colored liquid. Talia quietly gasped at the sight of it.

One of the Bureau agents said harshly, “That better not be a vial of Kakia!”

No answer.

“That’s a dangerous potion that can tamper with their mind. Zebrudia outlawed its use and manufacture under any circumstance! Don’t you *dare* use that as a truth serum! And how did you get your hands on that anyway?! Did you compound that *yourself*?!”

Not only could the drug be used as a truth serum, but also for erasing memories or even brainwashing. The nervous expression on the agent’s face as he squeezed Sitri’s wrist was an indication of how dangerous Kakia could be.

“Desperate times,” said Sitri. “We don’t have much time left before they get away.”

“You dare to break the law so brazenly in front of an officer?!”

“Yes; in pursuit of justice.” Sitri made a gesture of covering her ears—hear no evil.

Wrath seemed to flicker in a rainbow of shades on the agent’s expression.

What is she thinking...? wondered Sven.

Whatever reason Noctus and his team had had for attacking the hunters, Sven knew how careful Magi were. It made sense, as Sitri stated, that they wouldn’t stick around any longer than they had to. Still, two wrongs did not make a right. The hunters gathered here weren’t criminals who were used to brazen acts of crime. If Sitri had used the illegal drug discreetly, it would’ve been one thing. But to almost put on a show of it in front of this crowd seemed too risky.

Commanding every set of eyes in the camp, Sitri said with a half smile, “I’m kidding... This is just colored water.”

“What?!”

“See?” Sitri popped the cork out of the vial and drank its content before anyone could stop her. Magi in the battalion watched in horror as she swallowed the liquid and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. The gentle light in her eyes seemed to flicker for a moment.

“It’s okay. I’ve built up an immunity to colored water. Besides, it looks like we’re out of time. Let’s save our questions for later.”

Taking his cue from Sitri, Sven now realized the ground was quaking ever so slightly. Hunters wasted no time to arm themselves, understanding what was to come. Some were white with dread, some were hardened by resolve, and some were still looking at Sitri.

Bound and writhing on the ground, one of Noctus's Magi maniacally shouted, "Here come the reinforcements! This is the end! Death to all who stand in the way of our noble pursuit!"

Gark retrieved his halberd Relic from the carriage and stood to guard the two noncombatants.

Sounds of trees crashing and a cacophony of familiar screeches were rapidly approaching.

Sven clicked his tongue and said, "So there are more of them!"

"I'd guessed as much from what Gein has told us," said Sitri. "They're most likely a mass production model."

"Mass production... I don't like the sound of that. Any plans?" asked Sven.

"Let's attack in turns, starting with physical attacks. A mana barrier can defend its user either by reflecting, deflecting, or blocking. Maybe continuous pressure can push a blade through it, or a certain element of magic may slip past it. Anyhow, testing shall reveal its weakness. I've taken out this phantom once—I'll take charge."

Calmness seemed to spread from Sitri to the other hunters as they formed a circle around her. Her loose-fitting robe made her look more like a scholar than a hunter gearing for combat, but no one paid any mind to it.

"We have the War Demon on our side. They shouldn't be a problem," said Sitri.

Gark chuckled. "That's the *former* War Demon to you. I'm retired, kid. Don't count on me to carry you through this." A grin flashed under the helmet he had put on to complete his set of armor. "It's been too long since I've been on the playground. I'll take on a hundred of them."

"There should be a limit to how much damage the barrier can take," noted Sitri. "Although if Sven's arrow couldn't pierce it, we might struggle to reach that limit."

Then, as Sitri pondered, a faux slime crashed through the woods into the clearing.

"Its color's different!" said one of the hunters.

"Probably a different foundation!" remarked Sitri.

Unlike the last blob with white and black splotches, this faux slime was crimson all over. And although it was only a third in size, it was moving twice as fast. It was still slow enough for the hunters to evade it, but it wouldn't be as easy. This realization shook the hunters.

Sitri's voice, quiet but sure, rang out. "Vanguard, step forward. Block it with your shield!"

"What?!" replied Lyle, halted where he was about to clear the way.

"I'm going to measure the direction and magnitude of the force

field. Pull your shield back and retreat the moment you feel any weight on it. This is necessary for us to defeat it!"

Lyle glanced down at the shield in his left hand, held it up as commanded, and stood his ground.

When the blob came close enough to Lyle, it kicked off the ground to tackle its target with full force. The moment the blob struck his shield, the shield spun and flew out of Lyle's hands.

A shiver ran down Sven's neck. With his excellent vision, Sven saw the whole sequence. He now understood how Gein lost his arm and how the faux slime could destroy trees on contact. Lyle's shield had spun in its spot upon colliding with the blob. Lyle had held on for only a moment before the torque had become too great, and he'd missed the chance to let go of his shield. Having braced the shield with both hands, he had both his arms caught in the revolving shield, and the rotation had crushed his bones and torn his flesh. Then the shield had gone flying.

Screaming in agony, Lyle was pulled away from the faux slime by two hunters who held him by his underarms above where the rest of his arms dangled, barely unsevered.

The faux slime had stopped its march, now taking in the sight of the hunters.

"Healers, tend to him please. Magi, hold it off with fire magic from all directions," commanded Sitri without batting an eye. "So a rotational force field. Clockwise? Does it depend on where it's struck? With enough force to break through a guard's shield, close combat with that thing would be a nightmare—Luke would love a chance to slice through it though."

A storm of fire assaulted the faux slime, brought on by a large team of Magi who coordinated their attacks to maintain a constant bombardment.

"It's too strong..." muttered Sven. "Too much of a pain, anyway. I'm trying to forget that this thing's technically alive. Did you say it would fall apart over time, Sitri?"

"Theoretically," she answered. "But not in our case, realistically. Considering its body mass, amount of mana spent on its barrier, and amount of mana generated by its mana material, it'll last an hour at least. Casting magic spells at the barrier can eat up some of its mana, marginally shortening that duration. But considering the quality and quantity of the Magi here, our best play is to find its weakness through trial and error."

"How long is that gonna take? Will we make it?!" asked Sven.

"I'll figure it out as quickly as I can. But running isn't an option," said Sitri.

Sven swore. *Is there no other way?*

Although he'd gathered the arrows he'd fired at the first faux slime, Sven knew it wouldn't damage this second one after his best shot hadn't left a mark on the first.

Could Ark have broken through that barrier? Powerlessness threatened to overcome him. *No time to sulk*, Sven told himself. *I can at least help hold it off.*

Meanwhile, Sitri was muttering her ongoing analysis to herself, "I know. Rapid-fire magic at a concentrated area could temporarily pierce or negate that point in the barrier... Highly technical solution; not plausible with our current team..."

"There's another one!" shouted Sven.

"What?!" Taken by surprise, Sitri looked up.

Another faux slime was approaching them, tearing up the woods along the way. The one currently being held off by the spray of magic spells turned and beheld its reinforcement of the same size and color.

"No..." Talia let out a weak cry. "We haven't even...taken out the first one."

Sven finally understood why Krai wanted Ark on the job. Sven *thought* he had come to learn the hard way how hopelessly treacherous Krai's Thousand Trials could be, but he still wasn't prepared for *this*. Dealing with one nearly unbeatable enemy was one thing, but facing multiple of them seemed like a far cry from a "Trial."

We can hold them both off for a bit, considered Sven, *but we already got our hands full with one... I don't see an out. Could we even run if we tried with how exhausted we are?*

Even Sitri was staring at the faux slime duo in astonishment.

"Let's bolt, Sitri. We're in over our heads."

Sitri let out a long sigh and said, "Indeed... I didn't expect them to deploy more than one at a time." Her eyes were downcast.

Running's our only option, thought Sven. *I'm concerned about Noctus's research, but we can't follow through with that if we're dead.* Sven looked to Gark, who nodded in response. *We're running from tireless slimes that swallow anything in their paths, and there are two of them! It's do-or-die.*

Just as Sven was about to call for a retreat, Sitri groaned in disappointment and said, "How anticlimactic... What a moron they have working at Akashic Tower!"

"Huh?" Sven couldn't squeak out any more words in response to the unexpected comment.

"Hold your fire, Magi," said Sitri. "Everyone, step back."

Hesitantly, the Magi ceased their bombardment and stepped away from the pair of faux slimes...that weren't pursuing the hunters even when they were no longer being attacked—they simply stared at one another.

When the second faux slime came to about ten meters away from the first, it halted. It then bent its knees, ready to spring, and the first followed suit. Then, the blobs leaped into the air, and they smashed into each other.

“What the...?” muttered Sven in amazement.

It was like watching two feral beasts duel; one blob raised its fingerless arm, and the other slammed its head into it. Each impact was marked by an explosive sound, and the faux slimes continued slamming into each other as they melted more and more.

Mouths agape, the hunters simply watched the clash unfold, suddenly relieved from the threat of death. Even Noctus’s apprentices were dumbfounded by the sight.

“This proves my hypothesis,” said Sitri. “They’ve been attacking us not out of intelligent thoughts nor malice but out of pure instinct to recuperate their melting body—they were searching for mana material. They take no heed of human orders. Of course, if they encounter another like them, they’d start killing each other—after all, phantoms are a better source of mana material than hunters.” With her hand on her forehead, Sitri stood watching the faux slimes.

Now that Sitri had explained it, the hunters could see how this had come to be. Meanwhile, the faux slimes continued clashing with the same ferocity, and with every clash, more and more of their bodies melted away, shrinking them in size. Neither of them so much as glanced at the hunters.

“I guess we were...lucky,” said Sven.

“This could be considered a weakness, I suppose,” said Sitri.

“Another one! How many are there...? Oh...”

The third faux slime jumped into the fray of blobs, and a stinging stench wafted into the air. The explosive storm of clashing mana barriers grew, leaving out the hunters altogether.

Even the two captives were watching this dumbfounded. “This can’t be... We were never told that—”

“Now, thanks to your ‘friends’ taking care of that interruption, we can continue our negotiation,” said Sitri.

With the two Vault Investigation Bureau agents exhausted and dazed, and with the hunters watching the slimes collide from a distance, there was no one around to stop Sitri. Standing over the captives, Sitri shot them murderous looks.

Then Talia timidly walked up to them and said, “Um...Sitri, maybe we should regroup in the capital. We didn’t expect all that, and some of us are at our breaking points...”

Relentless attacks from the faux slimes had worn out the entire battalion. Unlike Sitri, who’d joined the mission afterwards, the hunters had been sweeping through the treasure vault before all of

this. Most still had the stamina to carry on, but they were mentally exhausted. After all, high-level hunters were still human; even Sven was beginning to feel the day weighing on him. While Talia's suggestion was a bit cautious, Sven was inclined to agree with her.

"We can build another team to deal with Noctus Cochlear, and..." Talia trailed off.

Sitri let her gaze dart through the air for some time before saying, "All right. Let's rest for a bit while we take turns keeping watch. I have...something I need to look into as well. Sven, keep someone on our captives at all times please. I have use for them later."

"Got it," answered Sven.

Sitri sighed and walked away, presumably to contemplate their next move.

Akashic Tower would certainly have more arrows in its quiver than just these faux slimes, assumed Sven. What do we do now...?

As he prepared to give the battalion their orders, he glanced at the captive Magi, whose expressions wildly differed from a minute ago. Their deadly determination to keep their secrets had been replaced by utter disbelief—they couldn't believe their eyes, which were fixed on the crimson-haired Alchemist.

Glowering down at Flick and his two cohorts was a pair of blazing eyes that belonged to Noctus Cochlear, a man whose face was carved with deep wrinkles that testified to his decades of dedication to his research. From him, a tremendous aura of mana exuded, so strong that it paled those of Sophia and even Flick, a top-notch Magus, in comparison.

"You understand why you were summoned," said Noctus.

His three apprentices cowered before his wrath. "Y-Yes, we have failed you."

None of the apprentices had expected the transmogrified phantoms to attack each other. To make matters worse for them, they couldn't release the phantoms all at once as they had to inject each of them with the potion, and this had delayed the apprentices from noticing the phantoms' cannibalistic tendencies. When the dust had settled, Flick had already expended all of their transmogrification potions—a substantial portion of their arsenal—all because they'd disobeyed Sophia's order. Humiliation shook Flick's shoulders.

Noctus slammed his staff in fury and said, "Did I not command you to follow Sophia's orders as my own?! Has your stupidity no end?!"

Sophia's voice came through the active Sounding Stone on the table. "That was a highly effective weapon at a very low cost. Most

foes would be overwhelmed by its sheer destructive power and nearly flawless defense despite its short life span.”

Phase one had been a complete disaster, but Sophia still hadn’t appeared before the other apprentices. This enraged Flick so much that he bit his lip until it bled.

“What’s threatening about high-level hunters is not their combat capabilities but their adaptability,” continued Sophia. “Half-baked traps and purely destructive monsters can’t so much as slow them down. The potion was inadequately tested and far from perfect, of course, but that would’ve been a nonissue with the slightest bit of imagination. If you’d imagined why I chose to deploy them one at a time, for example.”

Precisely because there were no shades of ridicule in Sophia’s tone, Flick was blinded with rage. He would’ve flipped the table at Sophia and her lack of explanation if it weren’t for his master’s glare.

“Forgive the incompetence of my fellow apprentices, Master,” concluded Sophia.

“The potion was just a small portion of our research,” said Noctus, burying his anger. “We still have plenty of other weapons to deploy.”

As a practitioner of forbidden science, Noctus had put much effort into building defenses to protect his work from the law and even the lawless. Still in his arsenal were chimeras created from monsters, potions that enhanced the human body, and a final line of defense that had cost him an arm and a leg—Akashic Tower wouldn’t budge just because one of its weapons was depleted.

“Our assumptions are already incorrect,” said Sophia gravely, however. “Not only were the hunters largely unscathed, but they also have Gark Welter among their ranks—that’s a former Level 7 hunter who has supposedly retired that we’re facing. He’s a hero without a doubt.”

Graveness sneaked onto Noctus’s expression too. He was very familiar with Gark, the man in charge of the Association branch of the capital. Gark had been such a fearsome warrior that there had been an admittedly shaky rumor of him killing dragons—widely regarded as the most powerful species there was—for sport. Yet, he wasn’t the kind of man to easily leave the city. In fact, Gark hadn’t even been listed on the list of hunters assigned to this mission, which had been leaked to Noctus beforehand.

“Since we’re all out of phantoms, we’d have a hard time taking him on,” said Sophia.

Finally, Flick snapped. “Sophia!” he shouted at the Stone. “Are you so hell-bent on making everything *my fault*?!”

Sure, Flick had made a mistake. But it was already so unexpected that the first transmogrified phantom hadn’t taken a single hunter

down with it.

The blame doesn't lie solely on me, he thought.

Ignoring Flick and his tantrum, a man tasked with reconnaissance placed his hands on his table and said, "Should we retreat? If we turn back now, we can keep losses on our end to a minimum."

"No," immediately answered Sophia. "Retreating now when we have nothing to show for it is no different than defeat. Besides, two of us are being held hostage. They may be compelled to divulge our information any day."

"Are you insulting them?!" bellowed Flick. "Not a word about us will pass their lips even as they draw their last breath!"

Flick had mentored the captured Magi himself. They were his comrades in research, and they were far better Magi than Sophia.

"I'd like to believe that, Flick."

Huffing in outrage, Flick was painfully aware of the disdain in his master's eyes pointed at him. There had been failures after failures. At this rate, his position as Second Apprentice may be in jeopardy even if he somehow made it through this predicament—that would put him at an unacceptably lower status than Sophia.

Sophia said without a hint of anger, "Let's wear them out first and finish them off with 'Akasha.' This is the tipping point—kill them all, and there won't be a trace of us left to follow. Deploy the Malice Eaters."

Flick's expression hardened at the implication.

The Malice Eaters, created through countless experiments led by Noctus and Sophia, were chimeras made up of a complex combination of monsters; revolutionary living weapons they were. Unlike the transmogrified phantoms that couldn't obey orders, Malice Eaters were obedient, powerful, and cooperative with each other. However, they couldn't be easily replenished, and more importantly—

"We need a maestro to utilize their full potential," said Noctus.

While highly intelligent, the Malice Eaters didn't understand strategy, nor had they received enough training to fully function as weapons. Combined with their lack of long-range attack options, the chimeras seemed to be a somewhat lacking option to take on a battalion of hunters including multiple monikered veterans.

A drop of cold sweat trickled down Flick's cheek.

"I'm sure Flick is eager to prove his usefulness," spoke the voice beyond the Sounding Stone mercilessly. "I've some final preparations to make. All the Malice Eaters are at your disposal. I look forward to witnessing your...tactical prowess. Though if a Magus of your reputation can't produce any results with them..."

"Understood...!" snarled Flick, barely concealing his boiling blood.

The dimness of dusk had swept the forest; the sun had nearly sunk beneath the horizon. The night belonged to the monsters—even a hunter’s enhanced senses weren’t as acute in the dark. Hence one of the most basic principles of treasure hunting was to wake and rest with the sun.

Outside White Wolf’s Den, the hunters’ base camp was luminated by a bonfire. All was quiet now that the faux slimes had cannibalized each other out of existence.

On the unpredictable battlefield, hunters’ spirits depleted faster than their stamina, impeding even the best-trained hunters. There wasn’t a face among the hunters unblemished by weariness. The pair of Vault Investigation Bureau agents, who weren’t as physically hardy, were resting on their sides completely wiped out.

“I went to hell and back the day we witnessed Prism Garden materializing. Compared to that day, today was a walk in the park,” said Sven.

“Was it that bad, huh?” said Gein.

Gein and the other non-First Steps hunters whispered to each other in disbelief. Among them, also, was Henrik, who hadn’t been there to witness the event.

The “flower-viewing incident” was still being retold among Steps members. It was the turning point for all who’d been there—everything they’d thought they knew about treasure hunting had gone out the window that day.

“Our enemy today was a phantom, but we fought against *the environment* that day,” said Sven.

Prism Garden, as its name suggested, was a beautiful treasure vault blanketed with an expanse of beautiful flowers in every shape and color. But underneath the picturesque veneer lay a garden from hell: a Level 7 treasure vault that Sven still had nightmares about.

“Pollen,” he explained, “knocked out half of First Steps seconds after the vault materialized.”

Prism Garden had appeared in a preexisting flower field. Mana material had transformed the field into a sea of mysterious flowers, and petals and pollen had filled the air. The chalky flowers induced sleep in anyone who touched or sniffed at them. The effect was so potent that it’d rendered even strong-minded hunters unconscious within seconds.

Treasure vaults could be categorized not only by their layouts but also into several other types. Among them, Prism Garden was categorized under the “Environment” type, denoting that its environment was the most challenging aspect of the vault.

“There was a big shift in the ley lines,” explained Sven. “My view changed all of a sudden. And before I understood what was going on, my consciousness was already fading away. The flowers didn’t just put you to sleep—they paralyzed; they poisoned; they did much more than that. But of course, we still had to deal with phantoms on top of that: carnivorous plants and beasts adapted to that environment and became powerful phantoms. The whole treasure vault’s a trap waiting to spring on hunters—there’s no chance you’re making it out of there alive without major prep.”

“So how did you make it out alive?” asked one of the hunters.

“We were lucky we had the Grievors with us.”

When Prism Garden had first materialized, it hadn’t been quite as lethal as it was today because it hadn’t accumulated as much mana material yet. For combat-centric parties like Obsidian Cross, though, it’d been practically the worst vault imaginable. If they had been the only party there, their bodies would’ve long become fertilizer for the flowers by now.

“Grieving Souls got us out of there. I still remember it like it was yesterday,” said Sven.

The Grievors had sprung into action without a word as if they’d planned it all out beforehand. While Sven had stood semiconscious and still unaware of his surroundings, Liz had stabbed herself in the gut with her dagger, Luke had bitten off his own tongue, and Lucia had broken off her pinky; each of them had jolted themselves awake with pain. Then, they’d all put on their masks that emblemized their party.

Wind had blown away the pollen, and flames scorched the flowers. The scene of smiling skulls roaming freely across the field of fire and smoke had been seared deep into the memories of the First Steps hunters who’d been still conscious to witness it.

It had been all because of their split-second decisions.

The Grievors had earned their monikers and fame now, but they’d been on the same level as Obsidian Cross back then with very similar levels and physical capabilities. How had the Grievors been so quick on committing to the unthinkable decisions of self-harm? In hindsight, Sven knew the answer. Experience had separated Grieving Souls from Obsidian Cross. Although the Crosses had been in the business longer, the Grievors had been through far more life-and-death situations.

As the powerful always garnered respect in the world of treasure hunters, no one in First Steps would utter an ill word about Grieving Souls—not openly, at least. Their reputation was far from pristine, but the Grievors still garnered fanatic supporters.

Grieving Souls and its insane leaps to action had inspired fear even in Sven. The word “talented” simply didn’t cut it—the Grievors

were *superhuman*.

And Sven had thanked fate for having them in the same clan. Yet he'd had no intention of remaining stagnant after witnessing that; he still had had pride as a hunter after all. Many other hunters must've shared his sentiment since First Steps had grown to become a clan boasting one of the longest registries in the capital. And this had also been why many hunters still eagerly answered Krai's request to this day.

While the hunters around the fire listened to Sven retelling the story, their two captives remained bound and on their sides without struggling. Their eyes were fixed on something—someone.

Sven noticed something peculiar in their gaze, and he said, "Hey, Talia, you know these two?"

"No, not...at all."

Talia turned her gaze to the ground, clearly more exhausted than most of the other hunters. In contrast, Sitri seemed completely unaffected by the day's work.

"Um...Sven, I'm sorry...about the slime-killer," said Talia as she shrank herself into her robe.

"Huh? Oh, don't sweat it. It's all Krai's fault."

Sven had counted on Talia's potion to work, but it hadn't been her fault that it hadn't. Considering that she hadn't even had a hand in making it, she shouldn't bear the blame. If Sven was to blame anyone, it would be Krai for his use of the vague descriptor "something like a slime" for the threat he clearly had known about.

Talia still seemed downcast. "But if I was as knowledgeable as Sitri..."

"Yeah...but you're not Sitri. She's a great Alchemist and a Griever after all. Though if you still feel bad about it, you just gotta get stronger," said Sven.

"Y-Yes... Thank you."

"I'd whip up some master plans too—if I could see the future like Krai does."

Noctus Cochlear, abuse of mana material, manipulation of a treasure vault, and bizarre phantoms. All these concerns together—not to mention that they were facing off against a major illegal magic syndicate—still weren't enough for Krai to come take care of the business himself. Instead, he'd just made it into another Trial. Staring into the darkness of the forest, Sven wondered when exactly later would Krai decide to join them. Secretly, he resolved to give the clan master a piece of his mind once he came.

Meanwhile, Gark frowned at how grave their situation had turned out to be. He'd only believed Sitri partially, but there was no refuting the reality with this much evidence in his face.

The Association wasn't quite aware of how far and wide Akashic Tower stretched in the underground, though they were known to be powerful enough to kill even high-level hunters every now and then. Akashic Tower was a particularly sinister and vast organization among the numerous illegal magic syndicates out there. Having recruited plenty of notorious Magi and Alchemists, they'd perpetrated at least several acts of terror across the continent supposedly all in the name of "pursuing truth." And naturally, the syndicate and its known members had earned places on the most wanted lists.

Still, Gark had never heard of them operating in the empire. Their experiments must've been kept extremely secret. Without Krai and Sitri, Gark would've been never the wiser until the experiments came to fruition.

Sitri's determination to hunt them down had almost matched the length to which Akashic Tower had gone to maintain their secrecy. From just one thesis, she'd uncovered the syndicate that had remained undetected for so long. Gark couldn't imagine what kind of maniacal scribble must've been contained in that paper to drive Sitri to pursue them so dedicatedly.

Over the years, Gark had become very familiar with the Grievors, and he knew Sitri was no saint but rather a troublemaker—in a different way than how Liz or Luke was. To put it simply, Sitri's problem lay in the fact that she'd do anything to accomplish her goal, as seen in her almost drugging the captives with an illegal potion.

What's her goal anyway? wondered Gark. *Could she be after whatever Akashic Tower keeps in its treasury, probably heavily guarded by mechanisms and other hunters?*

But soon he scoffed the ridiculous idea out of his mind. While it wasn't far-fetched to think that the syndicate hoarded rare items, Sitri would never chase something that couldn't be verified. And besides, the Grievors were good enough to hunt down any rare item they wanted on their own. Gark decided he wouldn't make wild assumptions just yet; that wouldn't be becoming of an Association branch manager.

Just then, Sitri returned to the camp after inspecting the aftermath of the faux slimes' cannibalism. Behind her, the Thieves she brought along with her were engaged in a serious discussion.

Sven, who had been chiefly guarding their camp, stood to greet her. "Nothing new on my end. Found anything, Sitri?"

She smiled with a hint of weariness and said, "Yes. How about the approximate location of their base?"

"What now...?" asked Sven.

As dread seeped into the pair of captives, Sitri produced a large fold-up map from her backpack.

“To tell the truth, I already had some locations in mind.”

Her map depicted the areas neighboring the capital, including the one in which they were now. Sitri had color-coded areas and noted details like topographic information all over it.

“A base close to a treasure vault was one of the concrete requirements for setting up the device outlined in Noctus’s thesis. Over time, I’ve looked into every candidate and considered how the ley lines flow under them, the density of mana material in them, the topographic and geological data of those areas, and such. In the end, I wasn’t left with too many locations suitable to hide a lab in. Combining that with the location where they’ve unleashed that abomination today, I’ve uncovered the answer.”

While an Alchemist’s job involved much research by its nature, Sitri’s quest had been fueled by her obsession. Even the pair of Vault Investigation Bureau agents looked in awe at the meticulousness displayed on the map.

“This here is a lot more info than you could’ve possibly researched on your own,” said Sven.

“Krai helped me out...just a little bit,” admitted Sitri.

“So that’s what he’s up to when he never goes to vaults...”

Sitri walked the group through her map, checking off location by location with a pen. Throughout her explanation, she never used overcomplicated vocabulary, yet still displayed her razor-sharp intellect. Using information anyone could see on the surface—like mana material density approximated from ley lines, the convenience of the location for someone wanting to build a lab, the difficulty of defending the location against attackers, volume of traffic, and range of magic spells that could be used for surveillance—Sitri had deduced potential locations with brilliant logic and well-calculated guesses. Eventually, she’d narrowed down the countless candidates to a spot close to where they were now.

“Therefore I believe their base is located by the cliff here. The side opening allows for easy escape and defense; it’s not as noticeable as erecting a building and far less laborious than digging an underground structure from scratch; there’s water nearby; and it’s not too far from where the first faux slime was unleashed.”

“K-Keep wasting your time!” shouted one of the captives out of the blue. “You’ll never find it by guessing!” Despite being tied up for hours now, he still seemed energetic enough to thrash about.

With a smile, Sitri brushed the map with her fingertip and said, “I’m pretty confident about it. Let’s send in a scouting party.”

Then the captive began madly screaming, “Kill her! Sophia! Release me! Do *not* let her go near our master!” His cursing echoed throughout the forest.

Gark gave Sven a look and thought, *Sophia? Who's he talking about?*

Clearly unfamiliar with the name, Sven returned a confused gaze as well. It sounded like the captive was calling for a hidden agent, who surely knew better than to show themselves when called.

"Yes... How easy it would be if she just did," said Sitri, her brows furrowed.

Talia's shoulders shook at the brutal tone of Sitri's voice.

"Hey, Sitri...you recognize the name?" asked Sven.

"Why, yes. She's the secondary objective of my pursuit," explained Sitri. "She's the first apprentice to Noctus Cochlear and my nemesis, if you will. No matter how much I find out about her, she just vanishes into the shadows. This research won't stop until we apprehend both of them. If I had to describe her..." Sitri looked at Talia with a hint of melancholy. "I'd call her, along with Noctus Cochlear, the 'Ignoble.'"

"You don't know Sophia!" shouted the writhing captive Magus with eyes now bloodshot. "A Level 2 failure like you will never stand a chance against her!"

Sitri looked into his eyes with an icy gaze and said, "I won't lose. It's my fault that I failed to apprehend her before. For the sake of every person in the capital, I swear on my honor that I will one day lock her up in the great prison of South Isteria." Her resolve made the captive Magus quiver.

Talia was watching her with concern.

And Gark started, "Sitri—"

"I'm not bothered by it," said Sitri as a sad smile crossed her face. "Like I said, I was to blame too."

"I love you, Krai Baby!"

Why am I always so whipped by her?

I was walking down the street at night. Liz was clinging to my right arm, and Tino was despondently following behind me to my left.

Outside the gates of the capital, there was only darkness. Even a sky full of stars didn't improve our visibility much. Leaving the city with barely any mana left in my Relics was practically suicide, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

Liz alone shone brightly with excitement. "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! We have to get there before Siddy dies!"

"She's not going to die..." I said. That would be a shit show.

I'm so sorry, Sitri, I silently apologized. I promised I wouldn't let Liz run free-range, but now... At least I'll keep an eye on her...okay? Please forgive me.

Tired of it all, I kept trudging along, one foot in front of the other,

towards White Wolf's Den. I shuddered at the thought that we were heading into that dense forest now.

I was going to barf.

Tino tugged me on my left sleeve. "Master, um..." she said with hesitation, "it may be dangerous for me in the dark... May I take your other hand...?"

What? Does Tino think Liz and I are holding hands? She's only annoyingly hanging on to my arm.

My night vision sucked, so I couldn't even see right in front of me. I'd almost tripped several times already on the way here, and all that was without me pretending to lead Tino by her hand.

How useless am I?!

Just to mitigate how pathetic I felt, I activated Owl's Eye. I'd been trying to conserve the last bit of charge on it, but who cared now that I could see in the dark like the sun was up.

No other creature stirred in the expansive field before me, as if every living thing knew to hide and wait until morning.

Picking up on Tino's request, Liz said with a threatening tone, "The fuck did you say, Tino?"

"No, Liz," I interjected.

"She's not gonna hold your hand in a million light-years, Krai Baby. Dream on and focus on guarding him!" snarled Liz.

"Uh, 'light-year' is a measure of distance, Liz, not time. And can you let go of me now? I don't want us to all trip and fall."

Liz grumbled as she finally let go of me. My march was finally a little easier.

With barely any Relics at my disposal, Liz and Tino were my only lifelines tonight. Looking back, I should've just bitten the bullet and had my Relics charged at one of the charging services in the city. Of course, that would've only elevated me from a useless idiot to a useless idiot buried in a pile of Relics, but at least I wouldn't have to die wondering *What if?*

The only usable Relics on me right now were a few Safety Rings, Shooting Rings, and the ace up my sleeve that Lucia had charged for me. I ended up not having to use that when I last ventured into White Wolf's Den. Though even the best chefs were useless without ingredients, and I was far from the best of anything.

I was doomed.

Cheeks blushing, Liz jubilantly said, "Don't worry, I'll slaughter everything in our path for you!"

Slaughter? Oh, wow, Liz. You shouldn't have... Clearly, Liz and I had a tragic incongruence in the definition of a bodyguard. Man, I wish Ansem was here instead.

"Master...I will protect you...so..." muttered Tino, eager to make

up for my incompetence, “can you tell me...what to expect?”

Why’s she asking me? How should I know? Well, Sitri’s very good at her job. With how long I’ve dragged this out, there may be nothing left for her to protect me from by the time we make it there—that would be nice.

“I dunno,” I said.

“T, what’s the fun in asking what will be there?! Your job is to protect Krai Baby no matter what shows up! Krai Baby hates spoilers anyway.”

“Y-Yes, Lizzy...”

The night air was chilling me to the bone.

I’ll make an appearance and get this over with. Then I can go home.

Chapter Six: Ignoble

Talia Widman had first encountered Sitri Smart shortly after joining First Steps.

Alchemists were scarce among treasure hunters because they had to devote an enormous amount of time and resources to their studies, and yet in return, their direct damage output barely increased. A running joke among hunters described Alchemists as knockoff Magi; the joke stuck around for so long because most Alchemists talented enough to be counterexamples would not choose to become treasure hunters.

In her years of treasure hunting, Talia had never met another Alchemist-hunter before meeting Sitri. One of the reasons Talia's party had decided to join First Steps was to gain access to the documents and facilities required for her to practice alchemy. She'd heard that First Steps offered a catalog of resources that rivaled those in institutions dedicated to the art of alchemy. These resources were out of reach for most individuals because of their exorbitant price tags or rarity.

And after joining the clan, Talia had discovered that First Steps offered amenities for Alchemists comparable even to those of Primus Institute, the authority of magical research in the capital. The clan provided even more resources than she'd hoped for: expensive equipment, rare catalysts, and even dedicated laboratories. But what had been the most surprising to Talia was that all of these resources had been compiled for the sake of the only Alchemist in the clan—Sitri Smart.

Sitri had been the most promising Alchemist in the capital until a certain incident; after which her name had disappeared from all headlines and conversations. And despite her being a member of one of the best hunting parties in the city, Sitri's accomplishments had always seemed to be overshadowed by those of the other Grievors. Her soft eyes and her favored bland, gray robe had made her look like anything but a masterly hunter.

Talia had known of Sitri because of the infamous incident, which had preceded their first meeting by a few years. But that preconception had soon been wiped from Talia's mind after they'd started working together. Upon meeting her in real life, Talia's impression of Sitri had been that of a kind, humble, and incredibly

brilliant young woman.

With open arms, Sitri had welcomed the newly inducted Alchemist to the labs which only Sitri had been using despite their doors being officially open to all clan members. At first, Talia would tremble when they met, but over time, Sitri had provided tutelage to Talia, and they'd become fast friends before long despite the busy Sitri not being in the clan house often.

Eventually, Sitri had called Talia her friend and said she'd been glad to have met her. When Talia had asked Sitri about her bright-pink hair, which she'd kept shoulder-length unlike most female Magi and Alchemists who'd grown out theirs, Sitri had explained with a rueful smile that she'd kept hers short because her sister had liked to grow hers out. And in return, Sitri had complimented Talia's blazing red hair and eyes, which Talia had always thought were garish.

It'd been evident how dedicated Sitri had been to her craft. She'd pursued every branch of alchemy there had been, at times even conducting—without hesitation—experiments too difficult and dangerous for the likes of more experienced Alchemists; though, she'd never dabbled in any unlawful experiments. Even Talia, who'd pursued alchemy despite the pushback from friends and family, had been overwhelmed by Sitri's fiery passion for their craft.

But funnily enough, this had helped Talia realize why such heinous rumors about Sitri had circulated—she'd been far too eccentric, and other Alchemists had been apprehensive of her obsession and talent for alchemy. What's more, Sitri had been unnervingly humble about her talents. She'd been a person who would go with the wind; if anyone had transgressed her, Sitri would just laugh it off. When asked about the cause of her infamy, Sitri would attribute it to her inexperience at the time, accepting the blame for a crime she'd been framed for. Sitri had even assumed, without a fight, the greatest demerit a hunter could ever receive—the demotion of her level, a punishment no lawful hunter would expect to face. Yet despite Sitri's kindness going so far as to threaten her own career as a hunter, Talia could think of no other person if she were asked to name the single best Alchemist.

According to her own standards, Sitri had considered herself too inexperienced to mentor another Alchemist, but Talia had considered herself Sitri's apprentice nonetheless. And as they'd collaborated in the labs, Talia's respect for Sitri had soon turned into adoration. One day, she'd vowed to herself, she'd become an Alchemist as spectacular as Sitri. In order to catch up to her friend, Talia had lost herself in books, written down every word Sitri had uttered, and conducted experiment after experiment deep into the nights.

As far as Talia had been concerned, she'd owed Sitri a debt she

could never repay. And so Talia had thought, Sitri had always been alone all because of the scandal years ago; if Sitri ever needed anything, she'd be there for her.

Nonetheless, she'd been painfully aware of the vast divide that had lain between their ability levels.

Hunters steadily marched in formation through the woods. Night had fully fallen upon the forest, but with the Magi providing illumination, the hunters saw through the dark as though they were under broad daylight.

"Are you all right, Gark?" asked Sitri. "This is a dangerous quest. Maybe you should go home—"

Gark scowled. "Your sister thought I couldn't handle this too. I'm not *that* old!"

"I'm happy to have all the fighters we can get, but did something happen?" asked Sitri.

Walking beside them was Gein with his second sword in his left hand. He said, "So...the Thousand Tricks isn't showing after all?"

"No," admitted Sitri, "I'm sorry. I've asked to take over because I have a history with the culprits."

"I've got nothing to complain about you," said Gein. "I just wanted to see the famous Level 8 in action."

For all the rumors surrounding him, the Thousand Tricks rarely showed himself in the field. Yet he remained as the ever-mysterious Level 8 clan master.

A smile blossomed on Sitri's face as she cupped her cheeks with her hands and said, "Krai was born to be a treasure hunter. Everyone in our party has earned a moniker, but Krai stands high above the rest of us. I have no doubt he'll reach Level 10 one day."

"Even you gotta admit that's going too far," said Gein. "There's only three Level 10s alive! They're unparalleled heroes! Is your leader really *that* strong?"

"He is. And strength is just a small part of his extraordinary talents. Even if Krai couldn't beat a sand rabbit in combat, my statement would still stand." Sand rabbits were at the bottom of the food chain in the ecosystem around the capital.

"A sand rabbit?" Gein cocked a brow, noting how earnest Sitri was.

"They aren't attacking us anymore..." grunted Sven, scanning the woods around them. They had not encountered any sign of their enemies since the faux slimes.

"Don't let your guard down," said Sitri. "Magi always act with caution, and that's especially true for the Master of Magi. They have

to be meticulously careful to have survived this long when every nation has a bounty on Akashic Tower. There will be another attack.”

While the woods offered substantial cover for any potential attackers, a hundred hunters (plus two Vault Investigation Bureau agents who’d insisted on staying with the group) were constantly scanning every direction. Even if another faux slime were to attack, the hunters wouldn’t be caught unawares.

Sven opened his map and estimated their current location, and he noted that they were a few kilometers away from the cliff Sitri had set as their destination. Once they were close enough, a team of Thieves would scout out the area. But if they couldn’t find the Akashic Tower hideout, the entire battalion would have to return to the capital and regroup.

Talia, who’d been following Sitri from a few paces behind, peered into her face and offered a vial from her belt bag. “Are you feeling all right, Sitri? You look a bit...tired. I have a potion for it if you like.”

“Oh, thank you, but I’m fine. By my estimation, we’re almost there.”

Disheartened, Talia stowed the potion.

“By the way, Sitri, where’s the *thing* you always tote around?” asked Sven.

Sitri had usually brought a very unique-looking magical creature—nothing ordinary like a golem nor a slime—with her to make up for her lack of combat capability.

Turning to Sven, she said, “Oh, Killiam’s in maintenance right now—”

Flashes of light broke the night without warning. The high-level magic spell Calamitous Thunderstorm lived up to its name. Lightning magic was one of the most difficult categories of spells to perform, and only the best of Magi could cast them. Bolts of light rained down before the seasoned hunters could even think about avoiding them. Roaring thunder and explosive impacts followed the blasts of flight. Countless thunderbolts, as if unleashed by a wrathful god, tore up a large clearing in the woods and blew away a horde of hunters. And after a split second of blinding light and deafening sound, the forest began burning around the hunters, leaving many of them charred on the ground.

Seeing that none of the hunters were rising to their feet, a figure descended from the sky. Above the hunters, a brown-haired Magus with a pale face and slack limbs rode on the back of a winged beast.

Chuckling, the Magus said, “Mere hunters are no match for my power! Her measly ‘defense system’ is obsolete while I stand guard. Master will surely commend me for this!”

Magi boasted unparalleled damage output with their powerful

spells. Even the long incantations and enormous expenditure of mana were no longer drawbacks when they had the element of surprise. Moreover, Calamitous Thunderstorm was Flick's best spell: it was an extremely powerful and difficult spell achievable only by those born with great talent in magic and who had dedicated their lives to pursuing the craft of spell casting.

With faltering feet, Flick dismounted the Malice Eater. At his command, the chimera—with a lion's head, dragon scales and wings, and three swords for a tail—lowered itself to the ground. Flick felt the symptoms of mana deficiency: rattling disorientation and nausea. With a flickering gaze, he caught a glimpse of Sven Anger, who was holding himself up on one knee.

"Hunters are hard nuts to crack..." muttered Flick through heavy breathing.

"What was that spell...?" Sven managed to say. "So you are one of Cochlear's minions."

"Didn't think any of you would still be able to talk..."

Lightning magic was so powerful partly because its sound, impact, and electricity could stun most targets even if they survived the bolts themselves. However, Flick hadn't expected his spell to prove lethal against the hunters with their superhumanly durable bodies. That's why he'd brought the Malice Eater down to the ground: to finish off the foolish invaders. No matter how high-leveled the hunters were, they stood no chance against the Malice Eater if they were unconscious.

"You can talk, but you can't stand," observed Flick.

"Dammit...!"

Gritting his teeth, Sven tried to stand, but his electrified muscles failed him. He was flattened onto the ground. Slowly, the Malice Eater approached him, its steel-slicing claws digging into the ground.

Flick cackled with elation, overcome with the sense of power. He had no mana left to cast spells, but it didn't matter. The humiliation of being labeled as useless in front of his master and of being bossed around by a colleague he'd deemed inferior had almost been unbearable, but he'd endured it.

"You've caused enough...trouble. But now, it's all over! Master, it was I, Flick, who—"

"Impressive," interjected a voice.

The impossibility of it short-circuited Flick's brain. His prime target, the one he had to kill at all costs, was standing on her feet before him. Dust covered her robe and hair, but her footing was far steadier than Flick's. Patting her robe with her hands, she was clearly unscathed.

Confusion racked Flick's mind. *Impossible! I've made sure my spell*

would hit her if not anyone else.

Sitri was wearing a weary smile.

It wasn't that Sven had let his guard down, but he simply hadn't expected an attack to come from the sky like that. Sven sprawled on the ground; the lightning, having shot through his armor, had severely affected his brain and heart.

Following his gaze, Sven saw Marietta, one of the Obsidian Cross Magi, also sprawled on the ground. Marietta's eyes were slightly opened, and she was conscious; but as far as Sven could tell, she was relatively unhurt. This could only mean she was lying there waiting for the opportunity to take Flick by surprise. Since Magi's own reserves of mana acted as armor against incoming spells, Sven expected most of their Magi to regain consciousness shortly. Most other hunters were also likely to survive if properly resuscitated—this was far from a wipeout.

"I never expected an area attack, especially when we have prisoners." Sitri chuckled. "I knew I couldn't replace Krai."

Flick still couldn't understand why Sitri was unscathed, nor why she seemed so calm while the rest of her battalion was on the ground.

"H-How...are you still standing?"

Sitri cocked her neck and said, "Why would you think otherwise?"

His face twisted in terror, Flick took a step back. He'd even forgotten to sic the chimera on his foes.

As if to drive him off further, Sitri approached him. And as she did, Sven saw her reaching into her belt bag behind her back.

"I belong to a Level 8 party," said Sitri. "Spells like that are commonplace in the dungeons we frequent."

Flick's eyes went wide with bewilderment, unobservant of Sitri's hand behind her back. "N-No...! A top-level lightning spell...commonplace?! That was my ace...!"

Still concealed behind her back, Sitri's hand emerged with a pink pistol that fitted in her palm. Without so much as a glance, she pointed the barrel right at Sven.

Sven remembered how Krai had once described Sitri as meticulously clever. *Clever indeed*, he thought.

Sven tilted his head without arousing suspicion from Flick and exposed his neck to the pistol. Whatever Sitri was up to, Sven trusted her. Maintaining his position, Sven scanned his surroundings for the weapon he'd dropped.

"In other words," said Sitri, "you lack imagination."

Pulling the trigger, she fired something into Sven's neck silently.

In an instant, Sven felt reborn. Immediately, he leaped to his feet and reached for a sword on the ground nearby.

Flick watched, dumbfounded.

“Thanks!” said Sven.

Sitri bolted. “I’ll get the others!”

Letting Sitri run past him, Sven swung the sword—not at the Magus on the brink of collapse, but at the far more intimidating chimera. But before the sword could reach it, the chimera whipped its triple-bladed tail at Sven, who barely managed to parry the series of slashes.

“It packs a punch!” said Sven as he was forced back by the unexpected force of the impact. *This is not gonna be an easy kill. How many of these things does Akashic Tower have?*

The chimera let out a lion’s roar.

Then, an enormous figure flew past Sven.

“Sorry for the wait!” shouted the War Demon, swinging his halberd that dwarfed Sven’s sword by comparison. Gark’s Relic, Hail’s Tusk, glowed with an icy aura as he crashed the blade down onto the chimera’s scaled back.

“Fire Arrow!” Marietta’s spell found the chimera’s face.

The tables had turned. Sitri was weaving through the fallen hunters, shooting them with her strange pistol and kicking their heads to jolt them awake.

“Healers, tend to the fallen!” she called. “If their heart isn’t beating, *kick them!* We can still bring them back! Hurry!”

Looking more carefully, Sven saw liquid being shot out of Sitri’s gun. And as soon as the liquid impaled a fallen, they rose to their feet.

“Is that...a water gun?” noted Sven. “Shooting doses of potion? How pressurized is it to pierce my skin? What a gadget.”

“Enough chitchat, Sven,” said Marietta.

“My bad.”

Sven returned his attention to the chimera. It’d just fallen down, having been severed in half by Gark’s lethal blow. The lion’s head was still twitching, but it was a matter of time until it didn’t.

“This...can’t be happening!” gasped Flick.

“Now’s your chance to surrender,” said Sven as he pointed his sword at the Magus and flashed a dangerous grin. “Not that you could fire another spell if you tried anyway.”

“No casualties, huh?” said Gark with great relief.

“We were able to treat them in time,” said Sitri. “Lightning isn’t as destructive as the other elements—the agents from the Bureau were close calls, but we were able to bring them back too. If we’d been struck by a spell more geared towards dealing damage, we might’ve lost a few people.”

But regardless, the attack had been harrowing. Lightning magic was deadly in itself; without immediate resuscitation, those hearts would never beat again. There would’ve been several casualties if

Flick hadn't hesitated in his assault, being shocked from seeing Sitri.

"I'm impressed you could move right away, Sitri. Are you completely unhurt?" asked Gark.

Sitri shrugged and said, "Of course not, even with Lucia having blasted me with enough magic over the years that I've built up my resistance. I would've been unscathed if I had Killiam with me though."

"Your party's insane," said Sven, although he couldn't help but wonder if he should have Marietta regularly blast the rest of their party with magic to boost their resistance. *That was a close call*, he thought. *I didn't expect a surprise attack from above. If there had been more than one attacker...* He shuddered at the image of the potential outcome. "We need eyes on the sky."

"I doubt they have anyone else who can cast spells as powerful as that," said Sitri. The more powerful a spell was, the more difficult it was to master. "They would've sent them both if they did—two consecutive spells like that would've killed the majority of us."

Wiping soot off her face, Marietta said, "Yeah, I can't even cast a spell like that—I'd be surprised if Akashic Tower has many Magi of that caliber waiting to be deployed."

"Exactly. And a high-level Magus attacking us means we're closing in at our destination," said Sitri, looking towards the clearing that the spell had created in their path.

"Wanna make him talk?" asked Marietta.

Sitri glanced at Flick, who was now tied up. "Not now; I don't want to waste any more time. If he was their last line of defense, they could be making a run for it right now. Let's end this before they can regroup."

Flick, meanwhile, remained quiet—aghast even. His eyes were glued to Talia, who drew her hood forward and hid behind Sitri rather unsuccessfully since they were of the same size.

Brows raised, Sitri asked her, "You're very popular today. What's going on?"

"I don't know," she muttered, barely loud enough for even Sitri to hear.

The battalion regrouped quickly and carried on with the three prisoners in tow. Tension in the air was palpable. A faint glow guarded each hunter: it was the mark of a defensive spell that increased their resistance to magic. Having faced off against a magical creature that even a monikered hunter struggled to defeat and a Magus who could cast a spell powerful enough to strike all nearly one hundred of them at once, they were painfully aware of how vast the syndicate's arsenal spread.

They trudged through the overgrown woods until they came to a

clearing, where they scattered in all directions without so much as a call. There was no need to send in a scouting party—before them stood a towering cliff with a decidedly man-made cave on its side.

Sven could hardly believe his eyes. “You called it, Sitri.”

“I have good intuition—not as good as Krai’s though, of course...”

Cloud-filtered moonlight illuminated three silhouettes in the sky. Only when they focused their eyes on the silhouettes could the hunters identify them: they were the same as the chimera that Flick had brought out.

“Three?” asked one of the hunters.

“No, five. Two on the ground on either side of the cave.”

Collectively, the hunters braced themselves against the murderous intent of the creatures—foes far deadlier than the wolf knights. While the hunters could hold their own in most scenarios, they were overwhelmed by the chimeras.

“There are too many of them,” said Gark as he lifted Hail’s Tusk and frowned. “Each of them has gotta be the equivalent of a Level 6 or 7 phantom: they’re fast and durable. Whatever creatures they’ve based them off of, they’ve put a lot of effort into these chimeras. And there are five, huh... This welcome’s a bit too warm for my blood.” Turning to Sven, he continued, “Let’s work together and take one out at a time?”

Sven could feel his face tensing up. He said, “Can’t let them stay in the air. If we don’t drag them down onto the ground, they’ll be attacking us unilaterally.”

Knocking an arrow on his bow, Sven quietly exhaled. At this distance, Sven had a fifty-fifty chance of making the shot.

“There’s a Magus on the back of one of the chimeras,” pointed out Sitri. “That’s their master most likely.”

“Would taking out the master confuse the chimeras?” asked Sven.

“If they’re as stupid as the other Magus, we may be better off just leaving them alone,” said Sitri, drawing a chuckle from Sven. Deadpan, she motioned towards the cave and continued, “Jokes aside, depending on how wide the cave is, it could be better to lure some of them inside. Fighting these agile and flying chimeras outside isn’t a good move.”

“You want us to run right past them...into *their* hideout?!” asked Sven.

“Beats fighting them in a clearing like this,” said Sitri.

Sven considered the idea, feeling his heart drum under the tension in his body. *If that’s our only move, we won’t be lucky enough to keep everyone alive a second time. Worst case we’ll be wiped out.*

Right now, they needed quality over quantity, and they were sorely lacking in that.

Apparently sharing Sven's estimation, Sitri twisted her brows and said, "It'll be tough. We may lose a few—no, let's not get into that."

"Can you take one, Sitri?" asked Sven.

He, Gark, and Sitri were no doubt the top three fighters here. Sven and Gark were accustomed to close-range combat, so they felt confident in taking on a chimera, or maybe even two for a short amount of time. On the other hand, Sitri was an Alchemist, just about the class weakest in close combat. While the Griever had displayed chilling cleverness, she hadn't exactly dealt direct damage all day.

As Sven scowled at the dreadful predicament, Sitri contemplated for some time before saying, "I'll hold off one—no, two of them no matter what it takes. But I need you to take out the rest while I do."

"Two?! Are you trying to kill yourself?!" blurted Sven.

No matter how many high-level treasure vaults she had been into, there was only so much physical strength Sitri could've accumulated as an Alchemist. It seemed impossible that she could hold off two Level 7 threats at the same time.

"I'm not going to die. There's plenty of things I still want to do," said Sitri, wearing her usual smile. "Give it your all, Sven. If I bring anyone home in a box, I would never be able to look Krai in the face again knowing that he's entrusted me with this quest."

The hunters had finally arrived at the hideout.

Only Noctus and the recon agent remained in the tense war room now that the last apprentice had left to make a last stand against the hunters' raid.

Noctus gritted his teeth. *We would have crushed them already*, he thought, *had Flick not been such a monumental imbecile! Employing an area-attack spell was one thing, but he was too confident in his power and too desperate to outperform Sophia.* "Damn! Why did he not take more than one Malice Eater? Sophia had told him to take them all! That pathetic, helpless bastard of an ignoramus!" *Had I overestimated him? Ambitious as he was, I thought he would have seen the bigger picture. Or is Sophia's talent so dazzling even for a man talented enough to cast one of the most difficult lightning spells there is?*

Convinced of Noctus's defeat, the recon agent suggested with a pale face, "Professor Noctus, let us make an escape from the back. Not to suggest our defeat, but those *are* our last line of defense. Now, we can still make it out without being caught. Nothing has gone as expected: the fall of the transmogrified phantoms, Flick's defeat, and the hunters discovering our hideout. It all has happened so fast."

Noctus had had at his disposal a force that could've easily overtaken the hunters—if it hadn't been for the series of unexpected

events. And at the center of every turn had been none other than Sitri Smart, the very hunter Sophia had warned him about.

The tide of the battle had shifted the moment she'd arrived at the hunters' base camp. Noctus had seen it all through his magical surveillance system: Sitri had been the one who'd defeated the first transmogrified phantom, caused Flick to rush into deploying the rest, and allowed the hunters to recover so quickly from Flick's surprise attack. If it hadn't been for her, Flick would've wiped out the hunters right then and there.

Noctus had known that Sitri was worth keeping an eye on when Sophia had first mentioned her, but he hadn't quite expected this. While Sitri hadn't seemed too physically powerful, she'd proven herself an exceptional asset in the battles so far. Funnily enough, she'd reminded Noctus a lot of Sophia. Perhaps that was why Sophia had paid her much mind.

Scratching through his white hair, Noctus groaned, "Not yet. We still have Akasha. We shall confirm that we are defeated beyond a doubt before we make an escape. A master must see the battles of his apprentices through."

Sophia, his first apprentice, possessed the talents to bring a massive fortune to the syndicate someday. Even though Noctus was forced to admit how powerful Sitri could be, his money was still on Sophia. Just as Sophia herself had pointed out, he attributed her advantage to their difference in available means: Sophia wasn't bound by law and had all the connections, knowledge, and technology of Akashic Tower at her disposal.

Sophia had no chance of losing as far as Noctus was concerned. Every defeat they faced today was attributed to an apprentice who let his envy for Sophia get the better of him. Sophia herself had yet to step up to the plate. Noctus wouldn't turn his back until he witnessed his dear apprentice see it through with the battle against her rival.

"Win, Sophia Black," he commanded, "and you shall finally have *everything*."

The Sounding Stone sat silently on the table.

"Use magic! Keep them away!"

"W-We can't—they're too fast!"

While these creatures didn't wield power as bizarre as the faux slimes did, flying chimeras proved to be even more of a threat than expected. By the hunters' estimation, the beasts flew faster than a hundred kilometers per hour. Worse, they flew so deftly that they could evade Sven's arrows. Even direct hits of magic failed to slow them down; their scales were clearly resistant to magic as well as

physical attacks.

But what gave the hunters the most trouble were the chimeras' hit-and-run attacks from above. While the beasts couldn't attack the hunters from afar, they charged hard enough to knock shielded hunters off their feet, and their fangs and tail blades tore through their armor like butter. The time it took a chimera to soar back up to the sky and reposition after each attack was enough for the hunters to heal the wounded, but if any of the hits proved fatal, it'd be the end of the line.

"Dammit! They won't come near us!" shouted Sven.

Much to the hunters' terror, the chimeras were smart enough to be wary of Gark and Sven. The beasts always kept their distance from Gark and the Crosses, making sure to somehow dodge Sven's pitch-black arrows flying at them through the veil of night. Yet there were too many hunters for them to gather up and defend everyone.

Though there was a silver lining: Sitri was successfully holding off two chimeras on the ground. Without swords or shields, she was flawlessly evading their claws, fangs, and tails with nothing but dexterity. Still, Sitri couldn't keep this up forever.

Despite holding the overwhelming upper hand, the chimera master and their beasts showed no sign of letting their guard down.

Sitri tumbled.

Claws pursued her, but she managed to dodge them and get back to her feet without a moment to spare.

Time dripped past with the hunters being unable to land so much as a single hit on the chimeras. They were out of time and choices.

"Everyone, buck up! We gotta tip the scales! To the cave!" said Sven. Throwing Sitri on his shoulder, he bolted and dived into a crater that had been created.

It's going to be tough, thought Sven.

The chimeras would no doubt pursue them, and Gark and Sven couldn't protect the rest of the battalion alone. And if anyone was to be injured on the way in, neither could they stop to collect them. Some of them were going to die, here and now. Sven knew that his fellow party members may end up among the fallen. But still, this was the path to minimal casualties. At an overwhelming disadvantage, with air superiority on their enemies' side, they had no shot at winning. Their only shred of hope lay within the cave where the chimeras couldn't fly as freely.

Understanding the subtext in Sven's command, the hunters roared with determination; it was a roar of courage to extinguish their fear.

As the battalion rushed towards the cave, two of the chimeras swooped down as expected. Running with the crowd, Sven rapidly fired arrow after arrow, yet still to no avail. Even in the face of this

charge, the chimeras still hadn't lost sight of Sven.

A chimera slammed into a part of the group, knocking several screaming hunters to the ground. But they couldn't afford to stop.

Roars of the chimeras discordantly entangled with the roars of the hunters.

Just as Gark, leading the charge, was about to reach the cave entrance, he slowed his run.

"Shit! There's another one!"

A towering bipedal silhouette blocked the entrance. Its black and golden body towered over the hunters and even Gark, who stood at over two meters. Sticking out from its already massive torso were limbs disproportionately large, wielding an enormous sword and shield veined with crimson light. And glowing on its head was the inverted-triangle sigil of Akashic Tower.

The giant knight moved its arms and legs as if to prove it was no puppet.

"A golem?! Dammit! When will this end?!" said Sven, his heart pounding like a ringing alarm.

Sven put all of his strength into drawing his bow and loosed an arrow. In this dire situation, Sven's years of training gave him his best shot yet. Like a shooting star, the ebony arrow flew true towards the center of the golem's shield.

A thunderous clang echoed in the air, and the giant faltered back a few steps—then the splintered arrow fell to the ground.

Sven stared at the result in disbelief: the golem had *caught* his arrow, not just deflected it. Whatever powers it held weren't all looks.

Gark roared and slammed Hail's Tusk into the golem's shield with all his might as a storm of magic spells assaulted the giant. At the same time, the chimeras turned in the air and homed in on the injured hunters. There was no getting past the golem that stood tall as ever, unaffected by the blast of magic.

There's no way out. Is this it? thought Sven, stopped and trapped by the golem standing before him and the chimeras flying behind him. *I'm not giving up! Not yet.*

Sven pulled out all the arrows left in his quiver and nocked them all at once; he was preparing for the attack Stormstrike—the namesake of Sven's moniker. Once he fired it, he wouldn't have time to gather any of the arrows. But if he was lucky, he could shoot down a chimera with this; by some miracle, maybe even two at once. This was his final gambit.

Every drop of blood, sweat, and tears prepared him for this moment. Sven sent all thirteen of his arrows flying through the night, each of them as powerful as his single shot.

One of the chimeras screeched, and it attempted to twist out of

their trajectories.

Blood drew from Sven's lips. "Dammit...!"

Some of the arrows had hit the chimera, but none killed, let alone hit its wings: they barely scratched its scales. The chimera hadn't dodged the arrows; it'd only gotten lucky.

The winged beast spun in the air and roared as if to celebrate its victory—before falling to the ground as if it was being pulled by an invisible hand. A crunch announced its plummet, halting another flying chimera in its place in confusion.

None of Sven's arrows had been fatal, nor had they been poisoned. He could only watch uncomprehendingly. Sitri, who'd gone back to drawing and dodging the attacks of the two grounded chimeras, went wide-eyed.

At the sound of a soft landing, all hunters' eyes gathered on a revealing breastplate of red and black, a pair of sturdy metal boots, a wrist guard on a right hand—and the body encased in them, a body as powerful and toned as a carnivore's.

Throwing back her head, she gazed up at the sky, her ponytail pointing to the ground.

And a drunken moan echoed through the night air. "Ooh, that hits the spot! Bravo, Krai Baby. I'm falling in love with you all over again."

In the clearing, the genocidal, troublemaking, uncontrollable, and unpredictable Stifled Shadow stood. The fastest runner in the world had materialized in the thick of battle.

Sven stammered out, "L-Liz?! Why are you—"

"Shut the fuck up, 'kay? I'm riding high *real* good right now."

Liz's face melted into an ecstatic smile as she watched the fallen chimera's head finally roll off.

She ditched us...

Stricken, Tino and I trudged through the pitch-black forest.

I'd be the first to admit that I was afraid of the dark. And I was afraid of forests. Multiply that with each other and I was *exponentially* afraid of dark forests. While Owl's Eye was still active, I could bear it, but when it ran out of juice...

After walking in the forest for some time with the two of us, Liz suddenly shouted, "Found 'em! See ya later!" and bolted, abandoning her job as my bodyguard. It left me wondering if she thought we were on a picnic or something. Although I knew her too well to be surprised, I couldn't help but feel like my hopes were dashed.

"I'm sorry I always rope you into things," I told Tino.

"No, Master...I don't mind!" she said with an encouraging pump of her fist.

Apparently, she was mostly learning from her mentor how *not* to act.

No monster nor phantom crossed our path along the way—probably because they were too terrified of Liz. And soon, light illuminated the woods ahead of us.

The forest was burning in what looked like the aftermath of a bomb going off; the smell of broken trees and burnt grass assailed my nose. That took me by surprise for a moment, but I saw no corpses.

Maybe a thunderstorm has come through here.

Tino stood still and stared at me, her doll-like face colored with subtle emotions. “Master...” she said.

“Yeah, uh-huh.” *I really wish Tino would start explaining things right about now.* “Let’s hurry. I better go do what I’ve come here to do”—babysitting Liz. I’d failed even that minuscule task that Sitri had entrusted me with. Every time I thought I hit the rock bottom of uselessness, I managed to find another trapdoor opening beneath me.

Tino’s eyes flitted before she drooped her head and said, “Y-Yes...um...I’m sorry, Master...that you have to stay with me. Um...if you’re in a hurry, you can go on...without me.”

Traversing this dark forest all alone? That would be cruel. To me.

Gravely, Tino observed the clearing and said, “Marks of a very powerful lightning spell...cast from above most likely. We should be careful of eyes above.”

“I see...” I nodded knowingly, secretly pitying Tino. She’d succumbed to “hunter brain,” an occupational hazard, the sort of hypochondria that made hunters imagine the worst-case scenarios at all times.

Even I knew about lightning magic: it was a super difficult branch of spells that only the best of the best Magi could dream of casting. Ark had earned his moniker “Argent Thunderstorm” precisely because he was a master of that branch of magic among other things. Magic, however, became more difficult and mana-intensive the more powerful and wide-range it was. No chance there was a random Magus capable of casting a spell this destructive—let alone a lightning spell—in the depths of the forest. Clearly, this was the mark of a natural disaster, and Tino’s nerves were getting the better of her since Liz left the task of guarding me to her.

Another look around confirmed that there were no dead bodies. There was no sign of rain either, but they say the weather was fickle in the woods.

If there’s a Magus who can cause such destruction nearby, I’d want to get far, far away from them.

“Don’t worry about anyone above us. Let’s get going,” I said.

“Are you sure, Master...?”

“Yep, yep. No problemo.”

Tino beamed at my bargain-basement reassurance and said, “Thank you! Then I’ll leave the sky to you, Master.”

“Wha— Uh-huh, yeah.” In charge of the sky I was? That worked for me since I could leave Tino in charge of any threats on the ground we’d have to contend with—including Liz.

Tino started leading the way, her spirits brightened. As I followed, I noticed that we weren’t even following a path, and Tino didn’t look like she had a compass either.

Individual combat styles, in addition to brute strength, played a large part in determining the tides of battles for hunters. For example, Gark’s halberd was powerful enough to sever a chimera’s body, Sven’s arrow could fly far and pierce most things, and what Sitri lacked in combat power, she made up for in problem-solving and strategizing.

The chimeras were formidable foes; their careful hit-and-run tactics had rendered Gark useless because of his short-range attack style, and their dexterity in flight had meant Sven’s arrows would seldom hit them.

Liz, on the other hand, was a hunter who specialized in speed. Mana material bolstered the physical abilities of all hunters exposed to it, but the specific aspect of physiology it would power up depended largely on the intentions of the hunter. Liz had dedicated a majority of the mana material she’d taken in during her explorations of high-level treasure vaults to her speed to a point where she could outrun Sven’s arrow and pick every pellet of a buckshot midair.

“Having trouble performing, Siddy? That’s what you get!”

“L-Liz?!”

Sven and Liz, if they were to go toe-to-toe, were *almost* evenly matched, but Liz’s combat style was better suited to taking on the chimeras than anyone else in the battalion.

Mistaking Liz’s confidence for an opening, a chimera descended upon her, ready to tackle her with a force powerful enough to knock out hunters more steadfast than her. However, a split second before the flying beast struck the girl, she was gone. Even Sven could barely follow her movements with his eyes. To Liz, a zealot of speed who could catch flying arrows, the chimera might as well have been standing still. Without so much as a glance at the beast, Liz dodged the tackle and straddled the winged creature, of all things. With Liz on its back, the chimera thrashed and soared high into the air, but it couldn’t shake the little human off it.

Liz was the embodiment of the high-quality fighter the hunters had been hoping for. Meanwhile, the wounded hunters now had the

chance to heal.

“Stop goofing around, Liz! Finish it already! Sitri’s not gonna last!” shouted Sven.

“Shut your goddamned mouth! You’re telling me what to do after you’ve cut me out from this much fun?!”

Liz leaped off the chimera and landed perfectly on the ground several dozen meters below. Moments later, the chimera Liz had ridden into the air crashed onto the ground, its neck severed with blood spewing from the cut. Liz made it look unbelievably easy after all the dread the battalion had gone through.

“Why are you here?!” cried Sitri.

“I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I begged Krai Baby until he said yes.”

Krai, the bastard... He’s finally sent us backup! realized Sven.

Liz couldn’t have come at a more crucial time just as the fear of a wipeout was becoming more and more real among the hunters. Krai’s miraculous foresight had struck again.

At this point, Gark and several others had the golem surrounded. As powerful as the giant was, its blows came slow. Now it was the hunters’ turn to hit-and-run.

“The Thousand Tricks has sent us backup! We can win this!” shouted Sven, not caring that he was giving the enemy information.

Sophia Black stood amid the battlefield, biting her lip. Nothing had gone as expected. She’d learned to expect the unexpected to some degree of course, but this was getting ridiculous.

Chief among the unexpected turns of events was Flick going rogue. Despite their differences, Sophia hadn’t expected him to disregard so much of her orders. Wasting the transmogrification serum was one thing, but Sophia actually was terrorized when he’d struck the hunters with lightning magic from above. She neither expected that her colleague could cast a spell of that caliber, nor that he’d use magic as his main mode of attack when she’d ordered him to use the Malice Eaters. Her biggest takeaway from it was the realization that she’d underestimated Flick’s abilities and pridefulness. She wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

With the blindsiding emergence of the Stifled Shadow, Sophia’s plan was completely derailed. Malice Eaters, apex chimeras that could take dozens of ordinary hunters at once, were being torn apart like toys Liz had grown tired of. Their claws and tail blades were completely useless if they could never find their mark—how could they ever find their mark on Liz?

Still, while the Malice Eaters were dangerous on their own, their

greatest strength lay within their reproductive abilities. Unlike other chimeras, which were sterile, Malice Eaters could sexually reproduce like most animals.

While Sophia had found the reproduction experiment insightful, she knew that the chimeras had no special ability to make up for their dreadful lack of speed against Liz. On that note, Sophia hadn't expected the Magus leading the chimeras to command them so timidly either.

Not only was Sophia now hopeless about eliminating the hunters, but the attack had also failed as a field experiment.

What a waste. This was such a rare opportunity to test the chimeras against a whole group of hunters of varying classes.

The Stifled Shadow soared high into the air with a single kick off the ground, her eyes set on the Magus commanding the chimeras at a great height. As Liz reached about the halfway point to the Magus, her acceleration dwindled until she was suspended in the air at the high point of her leap. Then, she *kicked the air* and rapidly ascended again; it took the Magus commander by surprise.

Sophia knew Liz's Relic well: Apex Roots allowed its wearer to kick the air just once mid-jump. This was a simple Relic, but it produced an astoundingly powerful effect when on the feet of the Stifled Shadow, who had superhuman speed.

Having reached the final Malice Eater in the air, Liz brought it down, Magus and all.

As far as Sophia considered, the remaining two chimeras on the ground would provide no useful data. Data on a fight against the Stifled Shadow was pointless anyway.

What was left on their side was Akasha—the weapon they'd designed specifically to take on Grieving Souls. Sophia and Noctus had worked to the bone to design this golem with a proprietary alloy armor that protected every inch of its structure and a shield that protected against any cut imaginable. Equipped with a sword and cannon, the giant artificial knight could handle short- and long-range combat. Sophia and Noctus had considered all possible scenarios when designing the thing, and they'd charged it with enough mana to make it through dragged-out battles. A golem's most glaring weakness had always been its subpar "intelligence," but with a human taking over decision-making for the golem, it was no longer a problem. This golem was a true weapon of war, worthy of the name "Akasha."

Noctus had devoted so much funds to the development of this golem that he'd received complaints from the Akashic Tower headquarters. For all the money and time they'd sunk into the golem, they were confident that it could hold its own against even a crowd of hunters.

Sophia watched Akasha, wielding its sword and shield and keeping all hunters, like gnats buzzing around a light, at bay. Even the spot where Gark had directly struck its armor only had a small mark to show for it with no damage at all. She imagined that the golem's controller was drunk with power.

Useless. Sophia bit her lip again. *You haven't even unleashed a fraction of Akasha's potential.*

In her eyes, her comrade in the driving seat seemed like a child wildly swinging a stick. Her fellow apprentices, for all their skill and knowledge in the labs, were amateur fighters. Sophia could already sense Noctus's disappointment at the controller's performance, which put the sigil on the golem's head to shame.

The Stifled Shadow took out the remaining two Malice Eaters in one breath before gleefully charging at Akasha.

Unlike the hunters, no backup would show up to aid the golem's controller. Their objective had been to diminish the number of hunters as quickly as possible, but apparently, Akasha's driver had forgotten even that. Even now, the golem seemed too preoccupied with blocking the series of attacks coming from the other hunters to pay Gark any mind, even when he was one of the most dangerous targets.

I'll have to take over as planned.

Sophia concentrated her mind and moved her fingers subtly so as to not tip off the hunters around her as she activated the spell to control Akasha. Using her administrator access, she took over control of the golem from her fellow apprentice. The golem halted for a moment before the true Akasha was unleashed.

We're doing good. We can win this. Sven was assured.

Now that Liz had taken out the chimeras, the enemies were left with just a single golem to stop the hunters from invading their base of operations. Despite that, the black giant overwhelmed the hunters at every turn: its arms swung hard enough to send hunters flying; it wore steadfast armor that had barely taken a scratch from Gark's attack; and it wielded a giant sword that threatened lethal blows. Still, Sven would take the golem over several chimeras any day, primarily because the golem's fighting was amateurish. Golems were incapable of executing complex orders. Even those created with great care had processing power inferior to humans, and thus they were usually relegated to only simple roles.

While this golem seemed "smarter" than others, it still fell far behind the ingenuity of hunters who had to adapt to new threats at every turn in treasure vaults—these hunters weren't so fragile as to fall to a hunk of metal blindly swinging a sword, no matter how

powerfully. All the while, Gark's attacks had been affecting its armor tangibly, as long as they could get past its shield. Extraordinarily durable though the golem was, Hail's Tusk's blade hadn't chipped at all while clashing repeatedly with its armor. But on the contrary, part of the golem's armor had frosted over faintly where the halberd had struck.

"I'm gonna tattle on you, Sidy. I'm gonna let Krai Baby know you're having a tough time," said Liz as she charged the golem. "And you owe me one."

"Don't you dare, Liz! Why did you come anyway?!"

Crazed as she always was, Liz leaped into range of the golem who was wildly flailing its sword. She darted past the tempest of the blade and kicked the golem square in its shield, shaking the four-meter-tall golem where it stood.

"Mmm!" cheered Liz. "It's so hard! I love it!"

She darted up the shield which was held up almost at a right angle, positioning herself too close to the golem for it to attack her with its sword. Then, she stretched her right leg out and struck the golem's head with a roundhouse kick. The impact forced the golem to step back, and Liz landed a few meters away. The golem—apparently unaffected by the kick—swung its shield at Liz, who dodged it without trouble.

With an index finger on her lips, Liz was in serious contemplation, her zealous ecstasy having faded. "Metal armor. Boosters on feet. Cannons on arms. Shield. Broadsword. No wings. All metal; even the joints are protected. It'd be tough to break head-on, huh..." she muttered to herself. "Well, I thought it was going to be easy. I should've known Krai would've never let me out just to deal with some half-decent chimeras."

Rushing over to Sven, Henrik handed him the arrows he'd gathered. For the most part, as they hadn't hit their mark, these arrows were in perfect condition.

As he took the arrows, Sven shouted to Liz, "I'll help, Liz; this thing's slow. My arrows and Gark's halberd can't put a dent in its shield, but the rest of it is a little softer."

The frozen patches on the armor looked especially weakened. If they were able to distract the golem while they blasted the patches with full force, they may be able to finally break through it. Liz might be fast, but Sven, Gark, and a few others still boasted better single-hit damage outputs than her.

"You're a Thief!" Sven reminded her. "Let us have some *fun* once in a while!"

The only thing that stood in their way now was Liz's lack of communication. In fact, asking Liz questions often ended up with her

rejecting just because she could, even if she had no strong feelings about it beforehand.

“I’ll do what I want, so you’ll do the same,” said Liz casually. “Your arrows won’t hit me anyway.”

Sven was counting on Liz to draw the attention of the golem, which would create an opening for the rest of them to strike. They couldn’t find any discernible weak point on the thing, so, while Gark aimed for its torso, Sven decided to shoot for its head.

“We don’t have much time anyway,” added Liz.

“What do you mean?” asked Sven.

Immediately, the golem, who’d been flailing its sword around, suddenly stopped moving. It slumped as if it’d suddenly been switched off and remained completely still.

Did it break down? Or is this part of a plan? Regardless, now’s the time, thought Sven.

Sven nocked an arrow; his arm throbbed in pain from the repeated firing. In an instant, the arrow was loose, and it flew straight for the golem’s head.

But just as the arrow was in the air, the golem reactivated and swiped its shield to intercept the projectile at its trajectory, displaying a level of purposefulness far beyond anything it’d shown so far. Instead of blowing the giant’s head off, the arrow struck the shield with an explosive impact and fell to the ground.

The golem moved differently now, and every hunter could sense it: the hunk of metal, which had been defending against the hunters without moving from its original spot, suddenly took a stance that seemed infinitely more human. One lunge, and it swung its shield at the group of hunters who’d been avoiding its attacks with ease until now.

The golem had suddenly become sentient; it’d inspired terror in the hunters.

“Run!” shouted Sven.

Warriors with steadfast shields were tossed into the air like a burst of paper confetti and, a moment later, crashed to the ground.

Swift and deliberately, the metal giant swiped its sword in the next movement.

“Fall back! Get on guard!” called Sven.

With a proper shift in weight, the golem lethally swung the sword. Barely missing the hunters, the blade ripped a trench in the ground.

Gark, having moved behind the golem, whirled his halberd around. With a roar that shook the air, he swung his halberd down at its leg—and found only air.

A shadow obscured the moonlight. The four-meter-tall hunk of metal had leaped into the air, only to succumb to the forces of gravity.

Landing on the ground, it fractured the earth to spew a billow of dust and assaulted the hunters with sound and a shock wave.

What...just happened?

Sven couldn't believe his eyes. The golem, who'd moved like a child playing soldier, now moved like a seasoned warrior all of a sudden.

The metal hulk lifted its sword. Splitting the air as it brought the blade down, it pointed the sword straight at Sven—it was initiating a challenge.

“For its size, this thing's too quick!” noted one of the hunters.

Healers were tending to those who'd been thrown into the air, but the golem paid them no mind. Neither was the golem fazed by the storm of magic striking its frame as if it was well aware that it was impervious. Only Gark, Sven, and Liz captured the golem's attention.

Below the towering frame in the night, a realization struck Gark.

“That thing's...acting like Ansem!”

Ansem Smart, monikered “Immutable,” was the impervious Level 7 Paladin of Grieving Souls.

Liz, Ansem's biological sister, quizzically stared at the golem and said, “It's about the same height as him... Maybe they've modeled it after him.”

“Why would they?!” blurted Sven.

And the golem was once again on the attack. Literal tons of metal charging at such a speed created a force too powerful for even them to block.

Its colossal blade—two to three meters in length—swiped at Liz, who breezily leaped over it. As fast as the golem was now, it was still far too slow to catch the Stifled Shadow.

Liz can outmaneuver it at least, assessed Sven, who was steadying his breath and searching for an opening.

Midair, Liz's eyes flickered in astonishment.

Streaking across the night air, a blazing line of laser shot out from the blaster on the golem's upper arm and grazed Liz's midriff.

Liz frantically kicked the air to propel herself back onto the ground. But by the time she'd landed, the cannon was already zeroed in on her.

Liz sprinted, her composure uncharacteristically rattled.

“What the hell?!” she exclaimed as another laser beam scorched the ground. “This thing's got a ranged weapon too?!”

The new feature pushed the hunters closer to despair.

While laser beams weren't as powerful as other weapons, they were extremely difficult to avoid—even Liz couldn't outspeed light. While Liz could predict the trajectory of the laser by observing where the blaster was pointing, there was no avoiding the beam midair if

she'd expended her midair kick for that jump.

Relentlessly, the golem hacked at Liz with its sword, apparently recognizing her as its number one threat; every swing of the sword threatened a lethal blow to Liz's minimally guarded, small figure. Whenever Gark reared his halberd, the golem struck it aside before he could bring it down, and every arrow Sven fired at what he thought was its blind spot was deflected by its shield—the golem was evidently aware of its surroundings at all times as if it had a bird's-eye view of the battlefield.

"Why is it going after Liz?!" asked Sven.

Unlike before, the golem was fighting intelligently, prioritizing its targets. But this made it even more perplexing as to why it was hounding Liz: as dexterous as Liz was, her attacks were relatively less impactful on a golem plated from head to toe.

"Knock...it off!" grunted Liz as she managed to stay a half step ahead of the laser beams fired in anticipation of her movements. A red welt marked her side where the first blast had hit her.

We can't take it out. It's too sturdy, thought Sven, calculating in his mind. *This is a different game from the chimeras, which could be taken out as long as Liz's attacks hit... Maybe knock it off-balance then? Can we pull it off now that the thing's almost as nimble as Liz?*

On the other hand, now that she was ignored by the golem, Sitri was observing her sister's battle in deep thoughts that veiled all emotions. Submerged in concentration, she was muttering to herself.

"Sitri!" called Sven. "Do you see a way out?!"

"Oh, yes... Good thing it doesn't have an area attack. My sister doesn't handle those very well," she answered distractedly.

"What are you talking about...?"

Liz was moving faster and faster as she avoided the laser beams and jabbed the golem's legs with kicks. Still, the golem remained steadfastly standing.

"I believe its weakness...is its endurance," noted Sitri. "Alchemist-made golems are powered by mana provided by a battery built into its structure. When it runs out of mana, it will naturally cease all functions, and the faster it moves, the faster it'll deplete its battery."

"We need to drag this out then," said Sven.

"Laser attacks expend more mana than anything else...I think. It shouldn't last long if it continues to fire lasers like that. I doubt its plating is ordinary steel, so taking it out with brute force won't be easy—this is our best option."

So the battle would end when either Liz or the golem runs out of power, thought Sven.

For whatever reason, the golem had given up on attacking the other hunters, who'd been taking refuge from the battle. It either had

no interest in killing the weak or had considered Liz a great enough threat to demand all of its attention.

Its sword cleaved the earth, and its wall of a shield swiped at Gark as if to brush off a speck of dust. Gark met the shield with his halberd but was knocked back, tumbling on the ground for a few rolls before using the momentum to return to his feet.

The clearing now bore scars from sword and laser; the smell of burnt dust permeated the air.

We can outlast it, decided Sven.

With their greater numbers and the several healers among them, he felt confident in their odds. Prolonging the battle would take the most toll on Liz, but Sven knew she'd sooner die than throw in the towel.

"Wear it out, Liz! Take your time and draw out those laser beams as much as you can, but pace yourself! We'll keep the sword and shield in check!"

"Like hell I will! I'm gonna waste that junk heap if it kills me! We don't have time for this!"

"Snap out of it! Think about it!" shouted Sven.

Kicking the hunk of metal couldn't be easy on her legs. Ignoring him, Liz sprinted to attack the golem from behind. The golem turned to follow her with its sword and laser beams. There was no question about who the last one standing would be in a full-force clash between flesh and metal.

No time? No time for what? wondered Sven.

Liz was visibly agitated by whatever clock was ticking down in her mind. She leaped above the swing of the sword before landing on and running up the golem's leg. With a perfectly timed jump, she avoided the laser and struck the golem's temple with a devastating kick. The golem wavered. But even so, the blaster on its left arm focused on Liz.

Instinctively, Sven fired an arrow at the golem's leg rather than its head. It struck behind the golem's right knee, forcing it to bend and causing the laser to miss its mark.

Gark, who was already rushing at the metal giant, fiercely struck down on the same knee with his halberd.

The enormous hunk of metal finally tilted; its left leg slid under it as it began to fall backwards.

"Hell yeah!" shouted Sven in triumph.

With a bit of good luck, it all came together: the golem had begun to lose its balance as it relentlessly followed Liz, and the combination of their attacks had struck in perfect succession. It'd take some time for the hunk of metal to regain its footing; even fully armored humans would take some time and effort to stand up once again after falling

flat on the ground.

This is our shot, thought Sven. *Gark can strike its head once it's on the ground, and I'll fire at its head if it lets go of its shield. Maybe we can take it out here and now—*

But Sven's flicker of hope was quickly crushed.

He and Gark watched dumbfoundedly at the golem—which was not on the ground—as it held itself up with jets of air blasting out of its back. The stream of air gradually raised the golem until it was standing on its two feet again, its sword and shield poised like nothing had happened.

“Th-This can't be happening...” muttered Sven.

Every threat that Akashic Tower had thrown at them thus far had been formidable: the seemingly impervious faux slimes, the top-level lightning spell that had incapacitated nearly a hundred hunters, and the pack of elusive chimeras. Each one of them would've been a rare and deadly challenge for Obsidian Cross if they encountered them in any of the Level 6 treasure vaults they frequented. But this golem with flawless fighting tactics was something else. Sven didn't have much prior knowledge about magic syndicates, but if all of these threats were a product of Akashic Tower's experiments, he wouldn't hesitate to label the syndicate as a terror to the entire world. He couldn't help but wonder if the golem's endurance surpassed even Sitri's expectations.

“Rraaaaagh!”

As Sven watched astonished, Gark and Liz roared and charged at the golem with unrelenting spirit. Sven saw true heroes in them both. Inspired, he nocked an arrow. He was aware that even the other hunters who couldn't so much as approach the golem were running around the battlefield to gather his arrows.

There's more I can do, he told himself. *This one hasn't seen Stormstrike yet.*

While Sven's signature attack had no effect on the faux slime nor the chimeras, he'd vanquished countless deadly foes with it in the past. Stormstrike demanded almost all the strength he had left—it wasn't supposed to be fired more than once in a quest—but still, Sven was sure of his decision. Mindful of the weight of the bundle of arrows his allies had gathered for him, he readied his shot and poured his soul into his bowstring, focusing his mind through his exhaustion. He was sure he'd find his mark. He watched Gark and Liz dart around the golem, but this wasn't a problem—his target was clear.

This time, I won't miss, he thought.

And with utmost concentration, Sven drew his bow with all his might.

Then, Liz suddenly relented on her onslaught and retreated a few

meters away from the golem. Her face was red, her breathing heavy; her eyes were bloodshot, and her face was covered with pouring sweat.

“Time’s up! That’s it!” she said.

Time’s up? Sven wondered what the self-centered, reckless berserker prioritized over fighting a formidable enemy.

Then, as if time itself had come to a stop, the golem halted where it stood.

“What are you all doing...?” A voice so incongruent with the sanguine situation before them broke the silence.

Sweat rolled from Sven’s every pore as the realization came to him: the voice belonged to a man who looked so out of place without any power in his frame nor a weapon on his body—as if he wasn’t a hunter at all. Adding to his forgettable appearance were his dark hair and dark eyes. With an utterly unintimidating gait and aura, he was so ordinary that no one would’ve noticed him in a crowded street. But here, while his eyes were looking at no one in particular, most hunters recognized him. And those who didn’t would never forget this day.

“Krai...? Oh...I get it now,” said Sven. “So *you* brought Liz with you.”

At the edge of the woods stood the Thousand Tricks, one of the three Level 8 hunters in the capital, naturally outranking everyone here.

He was infamous for his thorough secrecy of his tactics; he was a man who seldom left the capital.

Krai didn’t bat an eye at the marred battlefield. He didn’t so much as turn to Sven when he spoke. A calm expression lay on his face, in contrast to the nervous Tino beside him. Krai almost looked transcendent as if he was oblivious to the scene before him and the air taut on the brink of snapping. Even the golem had ceased its rampage in the face of this intruder as if it, too, was awestruck.

Liz was the first to move. And she said, “I’m sorry, Krai Baby. I couldn’t finish the job!”

“Yeah... Huh?” said Krai quizzically.

Even now, I can’t get a read on him, thought Sven as he lowered his bow.

Although the golem was just standing there, there was no need for him to fire any more arrows because he knew that everyone who encountered Krai would come to understand the meaning behind his moniker. Despite having worked with Krai for years, Sven still hadn’t the slightest idea of how Krai’s powers worked.

“I see... It’s all over then,” muttered Sitri.

Then, the golem finally moved again, exploding the ground with each step as it lunged into a charge faster than it had shown so far. It

showed no interest in Sven, Gark, Liz, nor any of the other hunters—the golem was rushing towards Krai at the other end of the clearing.

Tino, whom Krai must've brought along to observe and learn from his fighting, squeaked out a cry. "M-Master...!"

"Yeah. Uh-huh." Unbothered by Tino's terror, Krai simply took a step forward without even attempting to evade the enormous sword coming down on him.

Those who didn't yet understand the meaning of the Thousand Tricks's action cried out at what seemed like his last moment.

Just as the blade was about to meet the unmoving Krai—the golem was blown away. None of the hunters saw or heard anything, but the golem that three of their best fighters had failed to even knock over was tossed onto the ground dozens of meters away from Krai, tumbling over a few times on its way. Its sword, having been knocked out of its hand, was now stuck in the ground askew.

Gark, frozen, watched in disbelief. He saw no hint of Krai's attack: not even had he used a physical attack, magic, or Relic. Sven, as much as he was convinced of their victory with Krai's appearance moments earlier, had not expected this.

"So *that's* what a Level 8 can do...?! After they've struggled so hard against it..." muttered one of the hunters.

"I thought the Thousand Tricks wasn't a fighter!" said another.

"What? What did you do, Krai Baby? That was incredible! I couldn't even see what happened!" cheered Liz.

The golem sprawled motionless on the ground. Even though it'd withstood the fierce battle beforehand, the impact with the ground alone didn't seem to have destroyed it. And this left the hunters wondering what exactly Krai had done. The light faded from the inverted triangle—a symbol of truth and the sigil of Akashic Tower—and the golem fell completely silent.

With all eyes drawn to him, the Thousand Tricks simply wore his signature half smile and said, "Sorry, I couldn't really see in this dark. Did something happen?"

It was too dark for me to see diddly-squat. Owl's Eye had run out of mana, leaving me as blind as a bat rather than an owl. It was so dark in the woods that I could barely see the back of my hand if I held it out. Blurred moonlight left a faint impression on the clouds, but that was far from enough for my bat eyes. Walking in darkness really made me appreciate all sorts of illuminating technology from the bottom of my heart.

"Can you see in this dark, Tino?" I asked.

"Master..." said Tino in a tone that suggested she was pouting,

“you underestimate me too much. I *am* a hunter, you know. I can see in the dark at the very least.”

Apparently all hunters had night vision. And this was when I realized why Owl’s Eye was so cheap.

My heart was telling me to go home and take a bath, but I’d never make it back on my own, and we couldn’t leave Liz out in the middle of the woods either. My only hope was in Tino, who would be leading the way as she continued to scout out our path.

Suddenly, Tino said, “Master, there’s a bloody battle ahead. I sense one very nearby.”

“What? No, there’s not...” I said incredulously, and immediately I wanted to swallow those words. Who was I to contradict Tino—an observant Thief—especially now when I was blind in the dark and to the dangers ahead.

Tino muttered after a few seconds of silence, “I see. This isn’t even considered a battle to you... I still have so much to learn.”

The better question should be, “Do *I* ever learn?” For the record, I was far more useless now than I had been when I flew into White Wolf’s Den in my desperate attempt to save Tino—which was truly setting a new low. Maybe *I* was the reckless one if I kept leaving the capital when I was pathetically powerless.

After a few minutes of me silently discovering a new definition of rock bottom as I followed my trusty lackey, Tino suddenly stopped.

“There’s life nearby, Master.”

“Uh-huh?”

“There are several of them, and they ran, breathing heavily, when they noticed us. Should I catch them?” asked Tino.

As to why she’d asked this, I was clueless. Surely there were more than several animals in the forest, right? If they were running away from us, there was no sense in changing that. Live, love, and make peace, I’d say.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Just let them go. Let’s keep going.”

“Yes, Master...”

Tino should learn to disagree with me once in a while. For example, if she’d suggested that we ditch Liz and return to the capital, I would’ve agreed to it in a heartbeat. Of course, I’d blame Tino when Liz inevitably demanded an explanation for why we’d left her behind.

Soon we made it out to a clearing. Even though I could barely see at all, I could tell that there were no trees here.

The air was electrifying like how it always was during a battle. Just barely, I could make out a black silhouette moving across my darkened vision.

“Time’s up! That’s it!” said a familiar voice. As suspected, Liz had joined the hunters before us.

Whatever battle that had been taking place was apparently already over.

Thank goodness. I felt that weight was lifted off my shoulders as I tried to observe the clearing. “What are you all doing...?” I asked the groups of indistinguishable silhouettes.

I was getting the feeling that even though Tino and I’d been following Liz’s trail since she’d run off, we hadn’t arrived at White Wolf’s Den as far as I could tell.

“Krai...?” said Sven. “So *you* brought Liz with you.”

A small victory for me. At least it didn’t sound like they were mad at me for cutting Liz loose from her leash.

As I stood there confused, Liz said, “I’m sorry, Krai Baby. I couldn’t finish the job!”

“Yeah... Huh?”

Couldn’t finish *what* job? A monster? A phantom? Save for a breeze, the world around us was quiet. I did have a Safety Ring on, so one surprise attack wouldn’t kill me.

Then, I heard a small explosion or something. Tino said my name, sounding very scared for some reason.

“Yeah. Uh-huh.” I nodded along.

My eyes weren’t good enough to see in this darkness, and my brain wasn’t good enough to deduce the situation.

I took a step forward, and an upside-down triangle came flying at me. Confusion overpowered me, nailing my feet to the ground. Then a strong gust blasted right in my face and made me squint. The next thing I knew, the triangle had vanished. Moments later, the sound of a heavy impact resounded from the ground afar. My Safety Ring hadn’t activated, and I was in the dark as to what in the world was happening.

“What? What did you do, Krai Baby? That was incredible! I couldn’t even see what happened!” cheered Liz.

What a coincidence—neither could I! Won’t somebody please tell me what’s going on? And turn on a light or something.

Without a clue, all I could do was put on my usual, pathetic smile and say, “Sorry, I couldn’t really see in this dark. Did something happen?”

With a bitter look on his face, Sven emerged from the cave that he’d cautiously gone into some time earlier. He stood across the bonfire from me as I shrank into the warmth.

“We got our hands on equipment and documents but no sign of the culprit himself. Shit!” he spat.

“There was an exit in the back,” chimed in another hunter.

“Seeing how prepared they were for us, I doubt he’d left a trail we could find.”

From the little context I was able to learn, Sven and the others had figured out the people behind the changes in White Wolf’s Den. The hunters had chased them down to this place—their hideout—but they’d got away at the eleventh hour. Whatever enemies they had to face must’ve been formidable; everyone looked beaten-up and exhausted.

Monsters that even Sven, Liz, and Sitri could barely defeat...? Those would surely rank pretty high on my avoid-at-all-cost list.

Tino and I, very fortunately, had arrived just as the battle had wrapped up.

The majority of the hunters were now pushing through their weariness as they extracted documents and materials from the hideout.

A Vault Investigation Bureau agent whom I had spoken with a few times in the past said gauntly, “We’ll put in a report as soon as we return to the capital. At least we’re able to confiscate all this. If Noctus Cochlear had followed through with the research he’d theorized in his thesis, the empire itself would be in peril. The knights’ order will take it from there.”

Things had certainly escalated since I’d sent them out. I could only hope, against all odds, that they wouldn’t rope our clan into this any deeper.

“Hey, Krai,” growled Gark, “what did you do back there? Was it a Relic?”

What’s he doing out here on the field in full gear anyway? I thought he’d retired for a while. Poor Kaina must’ve been astounded, I thought. “What...? Nothing... I didn’t use any Relic.”

Now that I could see thanks to the firelight, I couldn’t help but notice that I was drawing some prying eyes. According to them, I’d blown away some final boss in the blink of an eye—which I had no recollection of, of course. The only thing I could remember was that *something* had been charging at me, but there’d been no chance in hell that I could’ve taken out a golem that they’d struggled against. And since my Safety Ring hadn’t activated, it was clear that I hadn’t even been attacked.

“Really, I think it...just went flying on its own.”

“Like hell it did!” snapped Gark.

No, of course it didn’t; that doesn’t even make sense, but it’s slightly more plausible than me having anything to do with it.

Somehow, even though I hadn’t performed a single useful action all night, my body felt heavy. Now that I was surrounded by a crowd of hunters (bodyguards), I felt like I could relax for a bit. Stretching

and yawning, I was ready to head back to the capital now that things had clearly wrapped up here.

“Hey, where are the Magi we captured? Anyone got eyes on them?” asked one of the hunters in the crowd.

“They were gagged and bound on the ground somewhere last I saw, so they can’t possibly have cast spells... We couldn’t really afford to pay them mind once the golem had shown up...”

“They gotta be somewhere around here—look for them!”

Immediately, several hunters broke out in a search, weary and daunted by yet another task.

Tugging on my sleeve, Tino whispered to me, “Master... Could they’ve been...the ones we ignored in the woods?”

“Y-Yeah. Uh-huh?”

I’d pretend I hadn’t heard that—I’d seen no evil and heard no evil there in the woods.

How was I supposed to know that Tino was talking about humans when she said “life”?! She should’ve spelled out that those were captives on the loose!

Having given directions to the search party, Sitri approached me. Her face looked completely refreshed, with only marks of dust on her robe indicating that she’d so much as taken a break since returning from another treasure vault. She was far too energetic, especially for someone stationed at the back of a party.

Beaming at me like she usually did, Sitri said, “Thank you for the backup. I didn’t expect us to be as outmatched as we’ve been. We might’ve suffered some casualties if it weren’t for your aid.”

Letting go of Liz’s reins had been completely on me, but I guess that had worked out fine in the end. At least Sitri’s clear eyes were not scrunched in reprimand.

My chest aching with guilt, I spewed a few very uncharacteristic words out of my mouth. “Can I help with anything?”

Sitri’s smile blossomed as she held my hands in hers and said, “Thank you. If something comes up, I’ll count on you. But I’ll do everything I can to settle this myself—this is my battle.”

In one of his emergency hideouts in the capital, Noctus was pensively scratching his head. His neatly trimmed white hair was disheveled, and dark bags pooled under his eyes, which twinkled with deep, boiling wrath and a hint of fear.

The former Master of Magi was cornered. For ten years and change, Noctus had steadily carried out his experiments undetected. Now, with completion nearly within grasp, he was teetering on a precarious balance with his entire project. With his base of operations

uncovered and most of its contents confiscated by the Association, the researcher had suffered nothing short of a devastating defeat.

Akashic Tower, the infamous magic syndicate he belonged to, allowed its members to use any means necessary to pursue true knowledge. Noctus had been fully aware of how many enemies he'd be making by joining the syndicate, and that had been exactly why he'd dedicated a considerable amount of resources to implementing protective measures against potential raids on his labs.

His security system—made up of Sophia Black, a Magus with extremely rare talents, and his other apprentices, who were sufficiently capable albeit less so than Sophia—was powerful enough that Noctus had been ready to accept defeat if said system was ever to be completely defeated.

In fact, the first line of defense—the faux slime—had held its own against a band of a hundred hunters. If it weren't for Sitri, the hunters would've never reached their hideout. Akasha in particular even had comfortably taken on several monikered hunters and a retired hero.

In fact, Noctus had been completely assured of his victory until the Thousand Tricks appeared out of the blue. Despite that Noctus could close his eyes and vividly relive the last moments of the battle, which he'd observed through magical surveillance, he still couldn't understand what had happened. In the blink of an eye, just as Akasha had approached the Thousand Tricks to attack, it'd been blown away. A single blow, whatever it'd been, had overpowered the golem. And this was despite the fact that Noctus had developed the golem over years of experiments to make it extremely durable to both physical and magical attacks thanks to its soulless nature.

Even more chillingly, the Thousand Tricks hadn't even considered the interaction as a battle. His abilities seemed otherworldly even when compared to those of the former Level 7 hunter, the War Demon.

Dumbstruck by those turns of events, Noctus had made it out through the hidden exit only because the Thief who worked in reconnaissance had guided him.

Now, the Thief and Noctus, along with four apprentices of his, were crammed into a room in this capital hideout. Save for the Thief, everyone looked as pale as if they'd encountered Death himself.

The experiment had failed. Now their only way out was to escape as far away as they could. Since Noctus's memories were the only remaining copy of experiment records they could access, it'd take years to recover their progress. However, that was still better than having to start over from scratch.

His apprentices were mostly unharmed except for the one who'd been knocked off of the chimera by Liz. Unfortunately, that apprentice

was now detained with a severe injury. The spirits of the apprentices in the hideout now, however, had been completely shattered: their eyes were blank as if all ambition had been wiped from them. Seeing their trusty Akasha being destroyed in a split second had left even Noctus—who'd seen his fair share of bizarre occurrences in his long life—shaking. His less-experienced apprentices fared far worse than he did. Flick and the two apprentices who'd been captured were the most severely traumatized among them.

“The Thousand Tricks...let us go on purpose! As we ran for our lives, shaking in our boots, he stared right at us and said not to worry about us—with a grin on his face!” said Flick.

After so long, he was still shaking with his knees held to his chest. His worldview of “Magi superiority” had been uprooted.

Sophia had marked Sitri as the most dangerous opponent, but Noctus now realized that they should've prepared for the Thousand Tricks more than anyone. Ever careful and calculating, Sophia had never once assessed a situation incorrectly before—but if even *that* had been manipulated by the Thousand Tricks, Noctus wondered what game the clan master had in mind.

“Why has the Thousand Tricks let us go again?” asked the Thief. “With all that power and information on his hands, why didn't he just come and arrest us himself?”

Noctus had to agree: there was no debating that the Thousand Tricks was a foe they couldn't take on. But the most enigmatic thing about him was the way he'd cornered them to the edge of a cliff just to let them get away next. If he'd wanted to, he could've easily apprehended all of them already. The Malice Eaters wouldn't stand a chance against a hunter who could take out the golem in one shot, and Noctus doubted that the Thousand Tricks didn't have his own way of circumventing the transmogrified phantoms' mana barrier.

In hindsight, he realized that the Level 8 hunter had always been at the center of this entire battle, pulling the strings all along. He'd been the catalyst too: if it hadn't been for his involvement, the changes in White Wolf's Den would've gone unnoticed for much longer, very likely leading to the successful conclusion of Noctus's research. And next, Noctus had only decided to eliminate the hunters instead of retreating because the Thousand Tricks had walked up to their base in the decaying district as if to warn them that he'd find them wherever they hid. Speaking of which, Noctus was still puzzled as to why the Thousand Tricks had given them a warning at all.

Noctus's research was highly illegal; he'd gotten away with merely being banished from the empire because of the legitimate accolades he'd accumulated over his career and the fact that his thesis had been purely theoretical at the time. If his experiments on manipulating

mana material—the performance of which was one of the ten capital crimes in the empire’s law—ever came to light, Noctus would be lucky to be only imprisoned for life; more likely, he’d be executed for it.

Noctus didn’t think a Level 8 hunter would have mercy on his enemies, much less fear the syndicate. And this left the reason behind his warning bell a mystery.

Snapping out of his contemplation and burning feelings of incompetence and defeat, Noctus said, “Enough. At this point we only have one choice. We shall leave Zebrudia behind.”

Zebrudia, home to various treasure vaults his research had required, had been the perfect environment for his experiments. The prosperous empire had also provided easy access to all materials they had needed. And Noctus had to admit that he’d felt personal satisfaction in wreaking havoc on the country that had banished him.

But now he had to relinquish all of that. After his banishment, he’d rebuilt his research underground. So as long as he lived, he could start over again. Whatever the Thousand Tricks’s motive had been for letting them go, Noctus felt no drive to retaliate.

Letting out a long sigh, the researcher asked the Thief, “Any word from Sophia?”

The Thief’s brows furrowed.

Sophia was the only one of them who was unaccounted for currently. While she was already participating remotely during the operation, she’d neither shown herself nor answered her Sounding Stone since the battle in the clearing outside their hideout. Since she’d wrested control of Akasha halfway through the battle, Noctus had assumed she had been alive and well then. But now there was no telling if she’d been captured, killed, or forced into hiding.

Sophia could handle herself and wasn’t the type to ghost Noctus just because of a single failure. She’d only joined the syndicate a few years prior, and Noctus had suspected that his research would’ve come to fruition much sooner if he’d been working with her from the beginning. If they were going to leave the empire behind, she was the person whom he desperately wanted to be with them.

Flick lifted his head. “Professor, I need to speak to you about Sophia...” he said, sharing a grave look with the other two apprentices who’d been captive to the hunters.

“You better not start your nonsense now,” warned Noctus.

Ever the prideful apprentice, Flick had pleaded his case of demoting Sophia several times before. If he let his jealousy get the better of him in these dire times, Noctus would consider him truly useless.

Flick trembled for a moment, but he held his master’s gaze and said, “No, Professor... I couldn’t believe my eyes, but—for whatever

reason I don't know—Sophia has infiltrated First Steps.” His face was strained and his eyes bright with fear.

“What...?” said Noctus.

Flick's voice quivered as he said, “I...saw her with my own eyes. She dressed very inconspicuously with her hood drawn and spectacles on. But there was no mistaking her.”

Noctus peered into Flick's eyes and found him to be in earnest. Beside him, the other two former captives were nodding in fervent agreement.

It seems I need to have one more conversation before we part the capital for good.

With a deep inhale, Noctus gave his next order.

Chapter Seven: Abyss

Underneath the streets of the capital, in the labyrinthine sewer network, Sophia Black steadily walked along the slick pavement through the revolting stench and opaque darkness. A stream of sewage lined the pavement; rats and cockroaches skittered across the corner of her vision.

A faint source of light illuminated the meters-wide tunnel, projecting no other silhouette than Sophia's. The hood of her lived-in, baggy gray robe fell onto her fiery hair; her eyes of matching flames remained emotionless.

At the end of the day, Sophia had devoted exorbitant funds, time, as well as her own blood and sweat into her research only for it to be now cut short, leaving many questions unanswered. She doubted that her master's revolutionary work, now that the documents were seized by the empire, would come to fruition anytime soon. Materials to create the device used to disrupt the flow of mana material were rare enough as they were; now there was no chance Noctus could acquire them within the borders of the empire.

Sophia had first sought to become an apprentice to Noctus Cochlear when she'd discovered his thesis tucked into a recess of a forbidden library. His theory had been brilliant, but above all, Sophia had been drawn to his obsession for universal truth—the burning thirst for knowledge that had driven him to research outlawed topics around the world, despite risking his title, position, and reputation. And before she'd known it, she'd begun seeking him out, never doubting that the author of such a thesis would've let banishment stand between himself and his research. Sophia had needed power. Her solitary pursuit for knowledge had plateaued, leaving her to yearn for a masterful mentor and colleagues that had shared her ambition.

Searching for Noctus had been challenging, to say the least, especially when no record had even indicated if he'd been dead or alive. When she'd finally found him in Zebrudia—from where he'd been banished—of all places, Sophia had trembled with joy.

Now that it was all over, it didn't seem like she'd spent enough time with him. She'd expected the empire to investigate their research eventually but not this soon. Transmogrifying serum, Malice Eaters, Akasha, etc. All of the breakthroughs in weapon design created under Noctus's direction had been confiscated, but as far as Sophia was

concerned, not all was lost yet.

Her mind was now fixed on a weapon—created out of a boundless thirst for knowledge—at least as dangerous as any of Noctus’s. It was a weapon that had been sealed away due to its *extreme danger*—the ignoble bioweapon capable of bringing the capital to ruins: the Sitri Slime.

She was on the hunt for the slime, which was presumably loose in the sewer system. Slimes, no matter how deadly, acted on instinct, making them easy enough to track down for anyone familiar with their nature. Taking count of the vermin and insects that the slime must be feeding on, Sophia was narrowing down its whereabouts.

She was determined to see this through after resorting to every heinous means she had to further her research. For Noctus, for her fellow apprentices, and for herself, she’d do whatever it took.

Sophia continued through the sewers all alone.

A few days after the investigation of White Wolf’s Den had concluded, I was sitting across from Gark in a meeting room within the Explorers’ Association branch in the capital. Kaina stood behind Gark, and one of the Vault Investigation Bureau agents sat grumpily next to him. Next to me sat Eva, looking resolute and immaculately postured. Words couldn’t express how much I appreciated her accompanying me when she was even less responsible than I was for whatever was going on.

Gark twisted his brows into a demonic furrow as he so often did, and he growled, “You don’t know *anything*?!”

“Unfortunately, no,” I said.

“Krai, you really think I’m gonna buy that?” he said, now more exasperated than angry.

Everything that had happened in and around White Wolf’s Den had become a much bigger deal than I’d expected. Despite the gag order from the empire, Eva had been *kindly* whispering tidbits into my ear. More and more knights of the Third Order could be seen on the streets over the past few days, apparently on high alert to hunt down remnants of Akashic Tower (I’d never heard of it before, but I was told it’s an infamous magic syndicate).

For some reason, I’d been often summoned to the Association in times like this. They were hoping for the amazing Level 8 hunter to unleash his ungodly power or something—these were but pitiful attempts to squeeze an ocean of blood out of this Level 8 turnip. I’d used to dread these summons, but now I held my head high—no blame could’ve possibly been attributed to me.

As I sat there indignantly, Gark scratched his head and said in a

seemingly compassionate tone, “I don’t know what you’re scheming, Krai, but there’s no shame in asking for help. We’ll do whatever we can.”

There’s no shame in me asking for their help?! Why are you acting like I should be taking charge here?! You should be doing everything, not just what you can! I thought without showing a hint of outrage on my face. When will you believe that I haven’t done anything? That I know nothing?!

“Checkpoints have been set up all over the capital, and so are bounties for their heads. I’ve been sending as many hunters as I can, but there’s nothing so far. Chances are they’re still stuck in the city. If the one Liz had knocked out ever comes to, we can start interrogating them...but no dice there for now either,” said Gark.

“Let’s stop beating about the bush, Branch Manager,” said the Vault Investigation Bureau agent who’d been glaring at me.

The Vault Investigation Bureau, a national agency tasked with researching Relics, vaults, and phantoms, held a lot of power in the empire and worked more closely with hunters than any other agency. Most importantly, my extraordinary ineptitude had put me deep in their bad graces.

“Thousand Tricks, we’re well aware of your secretive practices. I’ll also admit that whoever your sources are, your reconnaissance at times surpasses that of ours. It’s only natural for a treasure hunter to conceal his strategies, but this...*mess* has gone far beyond your Thousand Trials.”

Yikes. I knew members of the clan had taken to calling my brainless decisions the “Thousand Trials,” much to my embarrassment, but I hadn’t expected the term to spread outside the clan. I wanted to cringe into the couch, but I forced my face to remain stoic.

As if he was sentencing me to death, the agent continued, “Experimenting with mana material constitutes one of the ten capital crimes. In a national emergency like this, every citizen of the empire has the civic duty to cooperate with law enforcement. Believe me, the Bureau would prefer not to go against a Level 8, but be forewarned: concealing any information from us may result in criminal charges, Krai Andrey. We are prepared to use Tears of Truth if needed.” His tone suggested that he meant it, and that was reinforced by the scowling Gark beside him.

Tears of Truth was one of the most famous Relics in the empire’s possession. It had the power to see through lies, but because it was one of a kind, and that it kind of infringed upon human rights, there were miles and miles of red tape involved in using it. Even against criminals, the Bureau rarely authorized its use. The fact that the agent had it up and ready meant the empire was serious about their

investigation. Bizarrely, despite my sparkly clean rap sheet, I'd been subjected to this Relic more than once in the past.

Even though the agent's eyes were glaring at me like I was a criminal mastermind and giving me chills, I loudly proclaimed, "Bring it on!" And I shouted even louder and longer, "Briiiiiiiiit oooooooooon!"

The agent who'd been coldly judging me was now scratching his head in frustration.

What did you expect from me? I nearly blurted out.

Besides, as a connoisseur of Relics, I'd never pass up the chance to see Tears of Truth—the thing was a work of art, a national treasure.

No skin off my nose. I wasn't lying; I really knew nothing.

"Enough!" bellowed the agent. "How have you always circumvented Tears of Truth's detection?! Every time we use it on you, the reliability of the Relic is called into question! Besides, no one else in empire history has ever been *happy* to have Tears of Truth used on them!"

What could I say? I was an honest man through and through. It was just as puzzling to me that they were always so sure that I was withholding worthwhile information. I'd told them again and again how useless I was—to no avail. Blame the Association for giving me Level 8, I'd say.

Scorn flashed in Eva's eyes, which had been directed at me before turning towards the agent. "Agent Adrian," she said, "as you are well aware, empire law strictly governs the appropriate usage of Tears of Truth. Krai has neither been charged with a crime nor has admitted to withholding any information. If you intend to carry this out on a law-abiding citizen based on nothing more than a baseless hunch, we are prepared to protest it through official channels."

And that was how I learned the agent's name.

Adrian's frown had no effect on Eva, who sat upright and resolute as ever.

She'd make a great clan master.

The air in the meeting room was tense, though I was the type of person to schmooze officers. And so with a clap of my hands, I interjected, "That's enough. I really don't know anything about them, but Sitri had said she had a history with them, so you should probably ask her. She said she's going to settle this anyway."

Shadows flickered on Adrian's face, and he muttered, "Sitri Smart..."

Gark looked like he was carrying tons of invisible weights on his shoulders, and Kaina gave me apologetic looks. It wasn't every day that Sitri's name came up in our conversation because Sitri and the Association had a history too. Sitri had long gotten over the whole

thing, but apparently the incident still weighed on Gark's heart.

"Allow me to personally apologize for that matter as an imperial agent, albeit from an agency uninvolved in the incident. I would also like to thank her—she is a valiant treasure hunter after all," said Adrian.

"I mean...Sitri doesn't really care," I said, keeping to myself that her perception of criminal justice had changed that day.

"The case is already closed, which makes revoking the penalty very difficult. Attempts have been made to reopen it a few times in the past, but the circumstantial evidence was too convincing... Her moniker can be changed once no one addresses her with it, but being a member of Grieving Souls is hurting her on that front."

More than three years ago, Sitri had been roped into a certain incident and had been listed as the primary suspect in the case. Despite her charges having been dropped criminally for lack of concrete evidence, the Association had caved under high pressure and imposed the worst punishment in their book: revoking her levels and labeling her with a dishonorable moniker. This result had likely been a compromise between the Association, which had worked to protect its hunters, and the Third Order, which had failed to find any other suspects fitting the bill after thorough investigations. It'd been a huge scandal with the knights' order having put every resource they had had into solving it. Sitri could've very well been framed had anyone falsified evidence against her; given these circumstances, I'd say Gark had done a pretty good job of holding on to the shadow of a doubt in Sitri's case.

But I'd never forget the Sitri who—despite the smile plastered on her face with all the bravado she could muster—had been downtrodden behind the facade. Neither would I forget the powerlessness that had swept through me when I couldn't protect her from the slanderous verdict. She'd long returned to her usual self since then. Still, that incident had made me realize how sensitive Sitri had been behind her veil as I'd thrown spaghetti of comforting words and acts at the nonstick wall that had been Sitri.

"Solving this case would certainly help hers. Her contribution to this country as an Alchemist has been highly regarded. It won't be too long until her honorable name is redeemed," said Adrian. Apparently he was on Sitri's side, most likely because Sitri had seemingly thrived in the investigation of White Wolf's Den.

With his spirits somewhat higher, Gark said, "There were plenty of injured, but we were lucky to have gotten away with zero casualties. That's a miracle considering the caliber of forces thrown our way. We're about to get very busy in this city—anyway, what's Sitri up to?"

Covering my ass, looking for the Sitri Slime. But I'd sooner swallow a capsule of Sitri Slime before I'd admit that. "I'm not sure," so I answered. "Well, I'll talk to her if I see her."

Once I made it out of the intense meeting at the Association, I made my way to the clan house's lounge to look for Sitri.

Although three days had since passed, the lounge was still littered with hunters exhausted to their bones. What must've been a grueling quest had left them with peaceful expressions but no life in their eyes...like they had one foot already in heaven. Clan employees who staffed the lounge were running around wearily, weaving through bottles and barrels of spirits scattered all around. Though I didn't recall ever seeing those drinks being served in the clan house.

While embers of trouble still glowed out there in the city, at least First Steps was beginning to regain normalcy.

Go get drunk at a bar instead, I wanted to say. *Put those bonuses to good use.*

"Another insane trial... I thought I'd never see the sun again."

"Same... There were so many of us, with Sven, and Gark, and then Liz... I thought it'd be a piece of cake."

"If only half of us had gone, none of us would've made it back."

"Slimes...they're under my bed... Chimeras...outside my window... The golem...in my nightmares..."

"I'm gonna quit... I'll leave this toxic clan behind me..."

"That's it. Once the dust settles on this whole thing, I'm getting married. You hear me?! I'm getting married after this is all over!"

"Master is god... Master is god..."

What hard-knock lives hunters had...minus one girl who definitely hadn't been knocked as hard as the others.

Even as they noticed me walking in, no one cared to stand or sit up. Since I'd promised Gark our full-fledged support, I felt terrible about their current condition.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think things would get so messy... You know, our clan's pretty high up there level-wise, so..."

"Of course life's a breeze to you!" said Lyle, sobbing and banging his fist on the table he was leaning on. "You took out that golem in one shot! But we're not! Like! You! For the love of all that is holy, have mercy on us!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at Lyle, a brawny guy who'd crumbled on his table, his intimidating face now soaked in tears.

Was it really that difficult?

"Teach me! Teach me that move, Krai!" he cried.

"Force of will—that's all it takes," I joked deadpan.

"Force of will?!" bellowed Lyle. "Are you serious?!"

Good thing everyone made it back, I thought.

Death was an occupational hazard that could strike at any moment in this industry, but that didn't mean losing friends got any easier. I decided to let the miserable state of the lounge slide just this once.

I took in the lounge as hunters who still had the will to speak returned to their conversation.

"Has anyone seen Talia? We were supposed to meet up here..."

"No. She's probably at home or in her lab. She was saying how the quest turned out pretty hard."

Guessing that my wounded hunters couldn't fully rest with me in the room, I decided to go back upstairs after noting that Sitri was also missing from the lounge. And with one last look at the peaceful aftermath of a job well done, I left the lounge.

In hindsight, Noctus could recall numerous indications of Sophia operating undercover. For one, Sophia had been privy to the inner workings of First Steps. Although she'd misjudged the Thousand Tricks's involvement, she'd been the first on his team to know of Sitri's return and had been aware of the other Griever's absence from the capital; not showing up in the hideout even once since the hunters' arrival had also been strange on her part. She'd also given only bare-minimum directions through Sounding Stone calls, and she'd often remained silent even when the Stones had been connected. Sophia had always chalked it up to her being busy with preparations, but now Noctus understood that she just couldn't pick up the Stone in the presence of the hunters. This also explained why she'd sounded so uncharacteristically ruffled on the call after Flick's defeat. Even the ice-cold Sophia couldn't be blamed for reacting that way after an ally had gone rogue and attacked her with a potentially lethal spell, albeit unknowingly. Noctus also remembered how she'd regularly disappear while working with the other apprentices and how she'd been far too knowledgeable about the Griever's that she'd designated them as the theoretical targets when designing Akasha. Everything made sense if Sophia had been posing as a First Steps member all this time.

Going undercover was just about the most effective method of reconnaissance—and the riskiest. The toll it'd taken on her, having to double as a hunter while simultaneously furthering her research, had been significant. The potential consequences of her cover being blown would've been dire for her, and the risks were so significant that if Sophia had given a choice, Noctus would've forbidden her from doing so. Yet Noctus could easily believe that the girl could've pulled it off perfectly without tipping him off. He'd attributed her recent radio silence to her cautiousness while in the company of other hunters.

Since Sounding Stones were highly sought-after and only had a specific function, she'd naturally be questioned as to whom she'd been communicating with if she were to be caught red-handed.

Is she plotting another scheme?

Eyes narrowing in contemplation, Noctus lowered himself into his chair. He knew Sophia too well to imagine that she'd give up the fight, even after witnessing the inexplicable power of the Thousand Tricks.

Enough, he thought. Call it off. There is nothing else we can do.

Now only Noctus himself remained in his arsenal, and he wasn't foolhardy enough to take on the empire single-handed. Retreat, at times, was a valid strategy; perhaps Sophia's blindness to that was her only fault.

"Professor Noctus, we've managed to extract Sophia. We weren't followed," announced the Thief as he entered through the hideout door with a girl in tow.

The girl had distinctive hair and eyes the color of roaring flames; her figure was frail but not without feminine curves, and her innocent face betrayed no part of her history as an ostracized Alchemist—though, on her face was fear, something neither Noctus nor the Thief had ever before seen on Sophia's face. Additionally, she wore a pair of thick-rimmed glasses, which Sophia didn't. Combined with her braided hair and an outfit that differed from Sophia's usual fashion, she looked distinguishable from the Alchemist Sophia of the syndicate.

Flick might have jeered at her looks under different circumstances, but now Noctus and his team showed Sophia nothing but silence and respect. None of them could deny how much Sophia had sacrificed for their cause even if her undercover work wasn't enough to earn them victory against the Thousand Tricks.

Standing there, she looked confused.

"Your perseverance will not go unrewarded," said Noctus.

Sophia looked to and fro, and she took a step back.

"What? Wh-Where...am I? Who are you...?"

Her voice quivered with an uncertainty that no one on Noctus's team had found in Sophia's voice ever before. Terror flickered in her eyes in a way that almost made the other apprentices believe she wasn't Sophia at all. They watched her, astonished at the demeanor completely contrary to everything they'd known about Sophia Black.

"Enough of that performance," said Noctus. "We are leaving the capital—a temporary retreat, Sophia. The results of my experiments live on within my cranium. Fortunately, we still have one Malice Eater left. It should suffice for a guard shall we encounter any trouble on our way."

"What...?!" Astonishment filled Sophia's face as she noticed Flick and staggered back a few more steps.

“What are you concerned about?” asked Noctus. “I blame you not for this outcome. If I wanted to punish you in any way, I would first need to hold my other apprentices accountable for their failures.”

“M-My name...is Talia...”

“You’re taking the joke too far, Sophia,” cut in Flick. “Braiding your hair and wearing a pair of glasses hardly makes you a master of disguise. Or what? Are you suffering from amnesia?” he taunted, making Sophia’s eyes widen.

Noctus had to agree with Flick on the point that Sophia’s disguise seemed far too unconvincing. Anyone who’d interacted with Sophia for more than a few passing words would’ve easily recognized her. Certainly she wasn’t convinced that she was fooling Noctus and her fellow apprentices now.

Shaking, Sophia observed the room and reached for something at her waist. The color was drained from her face.

Or is this still a part of her scheme? wondered Noctus. “We will not return to the capital for several years at the shortest. Unless you mean to tell me that you would rather live out your life as a hunter.”

“Wh-Why am I here...? Sophia? *The* Sophia Sitri had talked about...?” muttered Sophia.

Noctus scowled. *Something is amiss here. What has happened to Sophia?*

He saw no possible reason why Sophia should continue playing her undercover part. Leaving the capital was too urgent of a task to be bogged down with some kind of prank, and Sophia knew it. Even if Sophia was forced to keep up the act for whatever reason, Noctus expected her to try to at least convey her intentions through subtle hints in the conversation.

Has witnessing the Thousand Tricks’s inexplicable attack confused her memories? Or else did she manipulate some of her own memories in case of being captured?

The thought that Sophia would meddle with her own memories was chilling but believable enough that his zealous first apprentice would follow through on it.

“Bring the Malice Eater,” commanded Noctus.

“Yes, Professor Noctus...” answered an apprentice.

Malice Eaters were a species of chimera unlike any other. Not only were they the deadliest chimeras Noctus had ever encountered, but their ability to reproduce was also truly remarkable. While they took longer to reach full maturity compared to other chimeras, the benefit of being able to mass-produce powerful chimeras outweighed the drawback. Incidentally, one Malice Eater had been grown within the city, and it hadn’t been involved in the previous battle in the clearing.

The apprentice brought in a Malice Eater noticeably smaller than

those deployed in the battle. And as soon as she'd seen it, Sophia cried out and crouched on the floor in fear despite having been the chief caretaker of the chimera. Guided by the apprentice, the Malice Eater approached Sophia with a growl and sniffed her. Malice Eaters recognized their allies by scent, therefore no matter how dedicated Sophia was to maintaining her cover, there was no deceiving this beast, which could identify a target's scent from kilometers away. The chimera continued to sniff Sophia, who remained shrunken on the floor, on the verge of tears. Before long, the chimera let out a cry.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Noctus. "Check again."

"Y-Yes, sir," said the apprentice.

He guided the Malice Eater to smell Sophia again, causing her to squeak out a scream as the chimera overwhelmingly sniffed and huffed.

"H-How is this possible?!" said Noctus as he watched.

The Malice Eater that had trusted Sophia more than any other apprentice now stared at the girl with apprehension and animosity—whatever the girl was, she was not Sophia.

The apprentices watched this exchange with their mouths agape, and the Thief went up to the girl in disbelief to peer into her face. Now even he was forced to admit that the girl couldn't be Sophia despite her looking identical to the first apprentice.

"A twin...?" muttered Noctus. "But even then..."

Never once had Sophia mentioned having a sister, let alone a twin. Even if the girl crouched on the floor was Sophia's twin sister, why had she joined First Steps? Did she contribute to Sophia's enthusiasm for battling the clan? A million questions sparked in Noctus's mind, but chief among them was—where was the real Sophia Black?

"Why were you impersonating Sophia?!" demanded Flick, on the verge of rage.

But Talia only cowered and shook her head. "I-I don't know what you mean...!" Her fear and confusion seemed genuine.

Suddenly, Noctus shivered. He felt like he had caught a glimpse of some horror he was never meant to know existed. A powerful urge to leave the hideout nearly pushed him to action when his Thief raised a brow.

"Someone has infiltrated the building, Professor Noctus," he said. Quiet footsteps approached.

Flick stepped away from Talia and pointed his staff at the door. He and the other apprentices wondered who the intruder could've been. A hunter wouldn't have produced any footfalls, and the knights' order would've charged in with their weapons ready. Most notably, the intruder had made it past the several locks securing the hideout

entrance.

The footsteps stopped just outside the door before someone slowly swung the door open.

“I’m sorry for my delay, Master.”

The room was silent at the emergence of the first apprentice. Noctus and his other apprentices had been awaiting her return with bated breath but now found themselves staring at her in astonishment.

Sophia’s crimson hair glowed from within her hood, and her brilliant eyes like dark rubies glimmered with intelligence. Her gray robe fitted her loosely to conceal any curves in her silhouette. On her back, Sophia was wearing a large pack.

Shocked beyond belief, Talia stared at her. If it weren’t for the differences in their getup, Talia would’ve believed that she was looking into a mirror—even identical twins wouldn’t have looked *this* identical.

Sophia gave Talia—now cowering on the floor with her back against the wall—a glance, and not a hint of surprise disrupted Sophia’s calm smile.

“I really am sorry,” said Sophia. “There was something I had to take care of. Although I was hoping to finish it up a bit sooner...”

Flick took a step back from her and said, “Sophia...you have nothing to say about...*her*?!”

“Oh, hello, Flick... I’m glad to see that you—and the other two captives—are unharmed. I was worried sick that not everyone would be here... What’s the matter? Why are you all pointing your staffs at me?” asked Sophia, her voice full of compassion.

The apprentices held their positions; the Thief looked at her with just as much apprehension as the others. Even Noctus, who thought he understood exactly how unorthodox Sophia could be, had never felt such a sense of otherness about his first apprentice.

“I shall ask you again: you have nothing to say in the face of this woman who is your spitting image?” demanded Noctus.

There were other questions to be asked, but none came to Noctus’s mind at the moment. His first apprentice had done nothing to alleviate the trepidation he’d felt since Sophia had walked through the door.

She pondered the question for some moments before smiling brightly. “That’s not quite true, Master. She’s not the spitting image of me—I’m the spitting image of *her*.”

Her words fell on the silent room.

“Besides, you’re too kind to say so. True, we have a similar frame and facial structure, but there are plenty of differences that distinguish us. I’m a bit taller, and my chest is a bit larger, making Talia a bit lighter overall—and that’s why I’m dressed like this. Master, the art of

disguise boils down to how well you can identify your target's key features and copy them. We are usually not as observant as we think we are," explained Sophia somewhat gleefully.

With a deep breath, Noctus asked, "What do you mean?"

"This," said Sophia as she lifted her hood, "is what I mean."

Under her hood, radiant crimson hair was exposed. Noctus and the other apprentices watched with befuddlement as Sophia gripped her long hair and pulled—a snap, and the crimson wig slid off her head. Noctus thought for a moment that she'd pulled out her hair before he realized that it was a wig. Unveiled beneath the wig was a short set of bright-pink hair; the crimson eyes that had once seemed to match Sophia's hair perfectly now emanated a strikingly different aura.



Noctus, the apprentices, and even Talia beheld Sophia with new recognition.

"I came to thank you, Noctus," said Sitri Smart, Sophia's nemesis. Without her disguise, even her voice seemed unrecognizable.

"Sitri...Smart...!" said Noctus. "H-How did you—since when did you take Sophia's place?! How did you find this place?!"

His apprentices had distanced themselves from the intruder as much as the confines of the room had allowed, putting the Malice Eater between them and Sitri. Although the close quarters would work to the disadvantage of the Magi, it was doubly as bad for the physically frailer Alchemist.

"Take Sophia's place?" she repeated before confirming Noctus's worst fear. "No, Master. It has *always* been me."

Impossible, thought Noctus, his mind refusing to accept this explanation.

When he'd first learned that Sophia was in First Steps, he had no doubt as to where her allegiance lay; he'd immediately discarded the idea that she might've been undercover while she'd been with him because of the strictly forbidden nature of his experiments. Undercover or not, she could face severe penalties especially since Sophia had contributed to the research almost as much as Noctus had, making her equally liable for the crime.

"Y-You were waiting to apprehend us for years?! Under the order of the Thousand Tricks?!" asked Noctus.

For the first time since she'd walked in, Sitri's expression clouded. Somewhat wistfully, she explained, "Noctus, you're a Magus among Magi; you have a brilliant mind, the dedication to pursue the truth, and enough power to follow your obsession through. Don't disappoint me now—I've sought out your tutelage because I was drawn to your work just as your other apprentices were."

"Wh-What are you saying, Sitri...?" muttered Talia.

Sitri ignored her and continued as if in a blissful haze, "I admire everything about you, Master: your magical prowess and knowledge that have once earned you the title 'Master of Magi,' your endless thirst for knowledge that has driven you to research the forbidden with no regard for your status, and your dedication and meticulousness that have allowed you to rebuild your research after facing exile. Researching the mystical requires a special set of talents, and you, talented in both magic and research, are undeniably a genius. Your talented apprentices would agree with me on that, I'm sure. You had everything I didn't... Creating Akasha or the Mana Material Manipulator would've been too time-consuming and costly, not to mention risky, for me to attempt on my own. As I've said, you

had everything: expensive equipment, rare catalysts and ingredients, talented researchers... You were even willing to consider my opinions when I hadn't served you long, Master. It was very fortunate for me that you remained in the capital even after your exile." Sitri spoke matter-of-factly, not with zealous fervor, but with logical certainty.

Noctus understood her meaning, feeling a sense of kinship in her passion. Still, she'd gone much further than Noctus would've dared to in her shoes.

"I have nothing to gain from revealing myself," continued Sitri, "except to show my appreciation. After learning so much from my apprenticeship, I didn't want to disrespect you by disappearing just as the ship begins to sink."

Finally understanding the situation, each of Noctus's apprentices stood poised with their weapons at the ready, preparing to attack; the Thief, too, was tensed in anticipation. They'd only hesitated to attack Sitri—even though she was giving them plenty of opportunities to—because they were still unsure of where her allegiance lay. After all, someone like her surely had no place in a reputable society.

"Sadly, our time together has come to an end," said Sitri ruefully. "I wish...we could've continued our research a while longer."

She remained unfazed even as one of the apprentices was pointing his staff at her despite knowing how powerful a Magus they each were.

"Noctus, you said you didn't understand the Thousand Tricks's intentions, why Krai had come so close to our hideout then as if he was sending a warning. It's simple," she said as she smiled. "He was sending a warning—for me to wrap things up and return to him before I find myself in too much danger."

"Impossible," muttered Noctus.

He couldn't imagine a Level 8 hunter allowing one of his party members to pursue forbidden research under any circumstances.

"But I do swear on my honor, Noctus," said Sitri, "that I haven't betrayed your trust. I haven't told a soul about me joining your research...and to be fair, no one can keep a secret from Krai."

All life drained from her face as Talia listened to her colleague's confession.

"I just didn't expect this moment to come while I was away," continued Sitri. "Everything was all set by the time I'd returned. Noctus, I hope you see how...*generous* Krai has been." She blushed like a girl in love speaking of the virtues of her beau. "He gave me—and all of us—a wonderful opportunity to test the products of our research against a whole battalion of skilled hunters. Can you imagine how disappointed we would've been to see our research extinguished without ever being able to test it?"

Everything made sense now. Noctus recalled how passionately Sophia had advocated for taking on the hunters head-on.

“Y-You are mad...” he muttered.

Sitri’s excitement grew as if she’d been given the best compliment she could’ve hoped for.

“The results speak for themselves. There were many surprises along the way, and, oh, how I wish we could’ve continued our field test much, much longer... The transmogrified phantoms, the Malice Eaters, and Akasha each overwhelmed a band of nearly a hundred hunters—with Obsidian Cross and Gark Welter among them! That was a great, great success! So much so that I struggled to rein them in from killing anyone!”

In hindsight, it was strange that their overwhelming forces hadn’t killed a single hunter. It also didn’t make sense how Sitri had so easily discovered their hideout and so easily found the weaknesses of every threat along the way. This was because the entire conflict had been staged by Sitri playing both sides.

“Oh, don’t worry, Noctus,” she said. “Akasha functioned wonderfully. The only thing I wanted was an area attack to deal with nimble hunters like my sister. Even its durability—which had been my number one concern going in—was more than sufficient. It only looked like Krai had taken Akasha out in a single blow because I’d controlled Akasha to jump away on its own. I would’ve liked to continue testing it, but Sven could’ve damaged it with his Stormstrike had the battle dragged on any longer. Maybe it was for the best after all!”

“A-Are you finished?!” shouted Noctus miserably.

He’d been made a fool all because he’d put his faith in the passion he’d witnessed in Sophia. With wrath overpowering his fear, Noctus raised his staff at his former first apprentice.

“Don’t worry. After your results are confiscated and you’re arrested for being the worst criminal in empire history, I’ll carry on your research. Your dutiful apprentice will pass on your life’s work to the future generation; what more could you hope for?” said Sitri with utmost sincerity. All the subtle signs Sophia had displayed that showed how unhinged she’d been under her mask came flooding back to Noctus, who connected the dots.

“Um...Sitri? But why did you make yourself...look like me?”

“Because, Talia, I’ve learned from my mistake,” answered Sitri as if she was explaining the workings of a natural phenomenon, “that if you wear your name around like a badge, there’ll be no escape when push comes to shove because there’s only so much one can do. That’s why I’ve borrowed your look for a bit while I was working with Noctus: because your hair and eyes are so beautiful...and *recognizable*.

Sorry.”

A tear streaked down Talia’s cheek, but even that had no effect on Sitri’s expression. She was a pursuer of truth, a slave to the stars who’d turned her back on morality without even realizing it. Her extreme philosophy reminded Noctus of the moniker that had been stripped from her.

The Prodigy had been an Alchemist who’d produced remarkable results through her research at the Primus Institute, just as Noctus had done. Her fame and level had grown like a stoked flame until it’d been suddenly extinguished over a certain incident, leaving her reputation an ashy puddle.

News of the incident had shaken the entire empire when an unprecedented mass breakout had taken place at the great prison of South Isteria, the largest and most secure prison in the empire, which had housed high-level hunters and lethally powerful Magi. There had been clear signs of outside help for the breakout, and the Alchemist who had been frequenting the prison shortly before the breakout had become the number one suspect due to circumstantial evidence. While she hadn’t been convicted of the crime, Sitri had been demoted to a negative level and was forced to use an incriminating moniker.

“Ignoble, did your demotion drive you to madness?!” asked Noctus.

The Ignoble laughed as if she’d been told a clever joke. “I *really* hate that moniker. It’s a horrible one, don’t you think? No one calls me that anymore...but still, that has always been the mark of my failure—until today. Master, from this day on—” said Sitri as she laced her fingers together and adopted a tone as if she was blessing the worthy with a knighthood, “*you* will be known as ‘Ignoble.’”

“You won’t get a chance, Sophia!” screamed Flick, his face the color of fresh blood.

In the blink of an eye, Flick sent a fireball that could easily engulf Sitri flying at her.

“Patience, Flick,” said Sitri, almost exasperated. She hadn’t so much as taken a half step to defend herself. “That was always your problem: you’re too emotional.”

The Malice Eater ran into the path of the spell, defending Sitri from the ball of fire with its body. Showing no sign of pain nor injury, the chimera bared its fangs at Noctus and his apprentices, its eyes full of animosity—Malice Eaters were trained to obey their master’s every order.

Gently stroking the chimera’s mane, Sitri said, “You need to give them love; living beings can’t be moved by logic alone. Malice Eaters are very intelligent, but they’re not machines. That’s why they protect me over anyone else. ‘Love and peace,’ by the way, is one of Krai’s

mottos.”

Another apprentice fired a spell from behind her, but the Malice Eater whipped its tail to knock it off course.

Even as a juvenile, this Malice Eater moved far faster than any human here could hope to. Noctus’s final line of defense had become his most dangerous foe all of a sudden. Knowledge of the chimera’s capabilities glued Noctus and his apprentices to the floor.

“Calm down, Noctus,” said Sitri. “It has taken me so long to come here because...I didn’t come *just* to say my farewells.”

“Enough of your soliloquy!” howled Noctus.

Their relationship—the years they’d spent as mentor and apprentice—had crumbled to dust, and Sitri’s confession was the nail in the coffin. If her involvement ever came to light, Sitri would be indicted more harshly than Noctus himself. Her honesty meant she had no intention of letting Noctus nor the apprentices out alive. And by the same token, they could afford no mercy for their former colleague.

Coming here alone, thought Noctus, either out of arrogance or not expecting all of us to be assembled will be your downfall, traitor!

Noctus and each of his apprentices were powerful Magi in their own right in addition to capable researchers. A Magus casting a powerful spell could cause as much damage as an entire squad of soldiers. There were five Magi of that caliber here, and they were not going to be mere sheep for slaughter.

What makes her so confident? wondered Noctus.

The first rule of fighting a Magus was to not give them enough time to prepare a powerful spell. And yet, Sitri didn’t take even a step while the Magi spent ten or so seconds chanting their incantations. Just as Sitri opened her mouth to speak, Noctus fired his spell.

“Infernal Kaiser!” exclaimed the former Master of Magi.

At his incantation, flames of the advanced spell ravaged a medium-sized area. Waves of golden flames, burning hot enough to melt metal, swallowed up the Malice Eater and Sitri.

A throbbing sensation shot through Noctus’s head as he cast the attacking spell, something he hadn’t done in a long time. Remaining in control of the inferno, he contained its flames and heat at a safe distance away from himself. The flames licked a portion of the wall and the door and reduced them to ashes in an instant.

Talia cried out at the ruthless flames as Noctus’s apprentices cheered in triumph.

As the tide of fire gradually receded, a charred Malice Eater was revealed. If even a chimera with resistance to magic couldn’t withstand the fire, Noctus had no doubt that the frail Alchemist was now nothing but a pile of ashes. When the flames finally cleared,

however, a chilling sensation ran through Noctus's bones.

"Please hear me out, Noctus," said Sitri.

She stood there without so much as a blister. The walls, the floor, the Malice Eater, and even her wig on the floor, however, had been incinerated.

"I-Impossible...!" muttered Noctus. "How are you alive?!"

By measure of destructiveness, this spell was even more powerful than Flick's magnum opus.

Sitri sighed, then pouted and said, "Listen to me because we'll never see each other again!"

Sitri held a large jar in her hands, its open lid revealing an empty space within.

"You've given me so much, Master," she said. "As a token of my thanks, I want to show you something, something that I've wanted to show you for a long time. It's a little dangerous so I'd entrusted it in Krai's care. But then he must've known I'd wanted to show it to you before we parted ways forever so he guided me to it—it took me a while to find it in the sewers before I could make it here."

What is she babbling about? What could she have possibly brought? thought Noctus as he watched the charred and half-dead Malice Eater trying to tear itself away from Sitri.

Explaining with the same passion Sophia had shown when speaking about her experiments, she said, "It's almost the polar opposite of a transmogrified phantom—it's a revolutionary slime, extremely adaptive. A transmogrified phantom converts the mana material that makes up its body into a well of mana; this slime absorbs mana and mana material around it and *grows* by feeding on it. I'm really proud of it actually."

"What...?!"

By Sitri's feet, a translucent blob wriggled. Noctus finally spotted the golden slime, which looked about the right size to fit into the jar she was holding. Noctus had never heard so much as a theory about a creature like that, but his blood ran cold at the implications of Sitri's description.

The world was full of mana material. Every living thing took in mana material and derived their energy from it. This same force gave rise to treasure vaults, phantoms, and Relics while also providing hunters with their superhuman abilities. If Sitri's description was accurate, a slime that fed on others' mana material could, by extension, devour the entire world—that golden blob posed a far greater threat to the world than a lifetime of Noctus's research combined.

"Are you truly mad?" he asked Sitri. "An abomination like that would be far too dangerous!"

“But there is this *one* thing I couldn’t get right—its appetite remains insatiable no matter what I tried. I’ve managed to teach it that Krai and I are *not* food, but that’s about it. An uncontrollable monster isn’t a viable resource; it’s barely usable as a last resort. So I was hoping you could advise me on this matter before—well, I knew it was a long shot.”

Then the slime stretched itself over the quivering Malice Eater. And as soon it was enveloped by the slime, the chimera was immediately dissolved, mane and scales included. Quickly, the slime’s color shifted from gold to the same ash-gray the Malice Eater had been. Only then did Noctus realize that the slime had only been gold in color because it’d absorbed his spell.

Beaming at him, Sitri said, “All right, Noctus, this is the other reason why I’ve come. I invite you to help me test *the* Sitri Slime. How fortunate for me that I can test it against a Magus of your prowess.”

“Run, Master!” called Flick as he fired a spell.

Noctus’s apprentices were talented enough to warrant their pridefulness. Seeing that such an attacking spell had no effect on the slime, they’d switched gears entirely. Flick’s spell permeated the room with thick, blinding smoke as the Sitri Smile disappeared within it.

“If we let her live...she’ll prove a grave threat to Akashic Tower. We’ll...hold her off!”

“Flick... Me, a threat to Akashic Tower?” called Sitri despondently from beyond the smoke. “I am *the embodiment* of their philosophy.”

Ignoring her, Flick continued in a voice bolstered by resolve, “Sophia came alone. You can escape if you make it out of here. Contact headquarters. She’ll be done for!”

Noctus felt strength coursing through his body from the buffing spells his apprentices had cast on him.

The Sitri Slime was too powerful. Seeing how it’d absorbed Noctus’s spell with ease, it was clear that even five Magi together stood no chance against it.

“Are you sure, Flick?” said Sitri with a twinge of surprise in her voice. “Noctus favored Sophia over you when you’d served him much longer. He’s wounded your pride; why don’t you *run* instead of die to protect him?”

“Don’t you dare mock me! I’m not like you!” shouted Flick. “I respect Professor Noctus! I *revere* him! Even if he doesn’t find much use in me!”

Quick-witted and a genius in his own right in a different way than Sophia was, Flick was a more-than-capable apprentice. Noctus hadn’t seen his pridefulness as a flaw and suspected that Flick may one day surpass him in the art of spell casting. Now Noctus regretted propping up the new talent over his long-standing second apprentice. Still,

Noctus's pride in his own powers had made him weigh talent over seniority.

Having calculated numerous alternatives in a flickering moment, Noctus simply said, "I am counting on you, Flick."

"Yes, sir!" answered Flick.

Noctus didn't expect his apprentices to survive. But if Noctus were to perish in their places, the remaining apprentices would have no way to reach Akashic Tower. He wouldn't let Flick's sacrifice be in vain.

The small doorway had been expanded when Noctus's spell had burned down a portion of the wall. He sprinted into the thick smoke. Following him was a quick succession of magic spells.

Then Sitri gasped.

"Wait—move!" she shouted.

Noctus's gambit paid off as he made it out of the room without running into Sitri nor the slime. Casting a wind spell to sail himself faster, Noctus darted down the hall at a speed too fast for his old age.

No sign of pursuers.

Sprinting and panting, Noctus was reassured that Sitri's forte lay in research. If she'd been as physically capable as full-time hunters in a Level 8 party, he would've never gotten past her. Now that he had, he knew Sitri couldn't catch up to him. Still, Noctus refused to slow down.

As any proper hideout should, this one had two exits. Making for the one that'd spit him out in a dark alleyway, Noctus bounded up the stairs. Once he was outdoors, he could fly away using magic, and even the heightened presence of patrolling knights wouldn't be able to stop him.

As long as he could successfully warn Akashic Tower of Sitri's betrayal, she'd be as good as dead. She could blame that on her desire to stroke her ego by revealing herself.

Noctus made it aboveground into the seedy alley lined with a cracked pavement. Several paces away sat a vagabond cloaked in a heavy coat.

Still no pursuers.

Without a second to waste, Noctus crafted a spell of flight. His body was lifted into the air, and his heart was solid with determination to avenge his apprentices and make Sitri pay for making a fool out of Akashic Tower—a feeling unlike the obsession that had driven him to continue his research after his exile.

But just as he felt the surge of wind that'd take him to the skies, a violent impact struck him from the side, and his world toppled as he crashed down the flight of stairs he'd just ascended. Pain shot through his back and arms as he tumbled step after step. Though once he

reached the bottom, Noctus, staff still in hand, forced himself to rise to his feet.

Atop the stairs stood the same vagabond from the alley. A dingy overcoat concealed his face and upper body as the figure towered above the stairs in the opening.

Almost on reflex, Noctus fired a spell at a casting speed attainable only through decades of dedication. A swarm of fireballs assaulted the vagabond and set the overcoat ablaze, but the figure didn't so much as make a sound. Still on fire, the vagabond charged down the steps.

"What?!"

Fighting through his confusion, Noctus unleashed a chain of spells: blades of wind, lances of water, bolts of lightning... He threw spells of every element he could cast at his mysterious assailant. Yet, his attacker showed no sign of slowing down.

Noctus's mind was boggled.

Eventually, his spells tore off the assailant's coat to reveal the figure beneath—an enormous, nearly naked humanoid for all Noctus could tell. It had muscles bulging beyond the limits of the human body and ashen skin that distinguished it from an ordinary human; it wore no clothes except for a bright-red banana hammock covering its loins and a paper bag covering its head. Noctus had never seen anything like it.



“Oh, good,” called a voice from behind. “That’s another one of my pieces I wanted you to see, Noctus. To protect the integrity of our experiment, I couldn’t very well bring it to White Wolf’s Den, so I didn’t get a chance to show it to you. Now I have no regrets.”

Noctus couldn’t tear his eyes away. The emotionless gaze stared back at him through the holes cut into the paper bag on its head. Despite its humanoid appearance, Sitri’s “piece” exuded an inhuman aura as if it was a manifestation of unadulterated violence.

“Noctus, I believe the downside of Akasha lies in its cost and incompleteness. As powerful as it is, we couldn’t have created it without the limitless funds of Akashic Tower and its advanced technology. Besides, Akasha would be outmatched eventually if the treasure vault’s level gets high enough. This is the solution I came up with—what do you think?”

The mysterious monster slowly approached Noctus, his brilliant mind now completely befuddled. He had no way to explain the creature now approaching him.

Sitri continued, “This is a bit embarrassing, but I needed power—fast. That was why I’d given up on researching golems on my own and decided to focus on chimeras.”

“Chimeras...?” Noctus was shaking. *Impossible. What creatures did she combine to make such an abomination? This is insanity.*

His mind knew the answer, but his humanity refused to accept it. The durability to withstand a barrage of spells without a scratch, the enormous energy thrumming from it...

This has to be—

“I...*really* wanted the right ingredients. Did you know, Noctus, that I’m the weakest member of Grieving Souls? If I let moral quandary hold me back, I’ll never keep up with them.”

Suddenly, all the dots connected in Noctus’s mind. The inmates who’d escaped in the breakout at the great prison were all high-level hunters who couldn’t be contained in ordinary prisons, and most of the escapees remained at-large even now, several years later.

Slowly, almost as if a giant puppeteer was pulling his strings, Noctus turned around. The sight of Sitri nearly knocked the wind out of him.

“You were...guilty of it after all?” he squeaked out.

“I made a mistake. But I learned a lot from it. There were only enough *usable* parts to make one, but you have to admire how it turned out. I called it—Killiam,” said Sitri as her eyes moved over Noctus’s shoulder. “Say ‘hi.’”

“Kill...” came a shrill voice incongruent with Killiam’s stature from within the paper bag.

Noctus shook at the vileness of the creature and even more so at the fact that Sitri Smart was a free woman, barely held accountable for her crimes, while he himself was exiled for his pursuits.

“Ignoble...!”

“Don’t worry; I won’t kill you. I’m still a hunter,” said Sitri. “Your memories though...I’ll have to get rid of those.”

Lifting his staff in desperation, Noctus began an incantation. Before it all went black, Noctus saw the smiling skull mask and heard the shriek “Kill...” in his ear.

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire, Part Two

She had been a kind, knowledgeable, and quick-witted girl.

Not all humans were born equal. Even those born in the same town, raised in the same environment, and had put in the same amount of effort could end up with dramatically unequal prowess. With every member of Grieving Souls being extremely hardworking, the disparity in their skills because of differences in natural talent had become all the more apparent.

The girl who'd aspired to become an Alchemist had worked just as hard as the others, and she'd been troubled because of it. Her friends had been climbing increasingly faster and higher, threatening to widen the gap between them into a devastating, vast divide. She'd never stopped honing her craft, always fighting alone as if she'd been expending her soul to do so.

Better than anybody else, I'd known how hard she'd worked; her dedication had been a shining beacon I couldn't bear to look at for too long. As a friend, I had had to help her, so I'd taught Sitri how to ask for help.

To me, she'd been a hero, braving the journey that I couldn't. I'd believed that her hard work, undaunted by her lack of natural talent, would draw people in and make them want to help her, eventually leading her to produce results comparable to the other Grievors someday. Even though she hadn't been the strongest among us, she'd been the most studious. While I couldn't help her myself, I could at least trust her and wait for her to succeed.

So I hadn't been at all surprised when she'd been the first one in our party to make a big splash in the capital, but I'd been relieved by it nonetheless. We'd celebrated together when she'd succeeded, and I'd consoled her when she hadn't; I'd seen her smile and tears more than anybody else had. There'd been nothing more I could do for her, and I hadn't expected that to change anytime soon.

The quiet and gentle Sitri would face more tribulations than the rest of us. But she'd been strong enough to admit her mistakes. And since she could turn failures into successes, she'd go further and further.

Sitri's voice replayed in my head.

"I messed up, Krai..."

“Even if the culprit turns themself in now...they won’t trust me, will they?”

“I’ll accept the moniker; some blame lies with me too.”

“There are plenty of things I can learn from this. Next time...next time, I won’t make such a mistake. I’ll be better.”

“But I did get my hands on some wonderful ingredients. So it all worked out in the end.”

“It’s wonderful! At this rate, it can continue to adapt to higher-level treasure vaults. Organic is the way to go! I did waste a lot of the ingredients though... Anyway, its name is Killiam!”

“I made an Alchemist friend! She has gorgeous hair and eyes that just catch your eyes, and...”

“Now I want some magic-infused ingredients. But with the tightened security...”

“The ingredients from the decaying district are no good... They’re so poor in quality that I can’t even use them for a mass production model...”

Now I was back at my usual position in the clan master’s office listening to Eva’s report.

“Huh. They were doing some wacky research then,” I said.

“You sound uninterested,” said Eva.

“That’s because I *am* uninterested... Leave the past in the past, I’d say.”

Three days had passed since Noctus Cochlear (one of the higher-ups of Akashic Tower) and his team had been arrested. Tense patrols of knights from the Third Order were just getting sparser, signaling the return of tranquility to the capital. A gag order meant that most nonhunters had no idea of what was happening to begin with, but I assumed even they could sense that the storm had passed.

“Breaking down phantoms, chimeras, a golem...and a *slime*. They were trying their hands at all sorts of things, weren’t they?” I said.

Practically an expo on alchemy, isn’t it?

Not much detail had been included in the report, but the slime they’d confiscated from their headquarters in the capital was apparently the worst of the worst. Sven had seemed rattled by it, at least when he’d rambled as he’d violently shaken me by the shoulders, his expression looking like he’d had a brush with death.

I still had the impression that slimes were the weakest creature there was, but I was tempted to see who’d win in a fight between Akashic Tower’s slime and the Sitri Slime... On second thought, I had no interest in being near either of them.

At the end of the day, the case had been closed when the ringleader, Noctus Cochlear, had been arrested. While he and his men

had lost their memory leading up to their arrests, their experimental records had been confiscated by the empire, and they'd been all sent to the great prison of South Isteria to await judgment.

Everyone involved in the investigation, including those from my clan, had been awarded an even bigger bonus than what had been promised in exchange for their confidentiality regarding all details they'd uncovered during their investigation.

Now that the culprits had been arrested, the past few days had definitely been a relief that I no longer had to endure Gark and Kaina's presence as they'd kept knocking on my door at every turn.

As I sat there enjoying a peaceful day, polishing my Relics, the star of the show walked through the door.

Sitri had really outdone herself this time. She'd taken charge of the hunters in my stead and uncovered the cause of the abnormalities in the treasure vault. After returning to the capital, she'd single-handedly uncovered the Akashic Tower hideout and captured the band that had escaped the cave outside White Wolf's Den—a standout performance if I'd ever seen one. She'd even taken care of the Sitri Slime, which I'd accidentally let escape. In fact, most of her accomplishments happened to cover my butt. If I were the emperor, I would've awarded her a medal, no question.

The hero of the day, my old friend, approached me with silent footsteps and smiled cheerfully.

"I made it through that meeting," she said.

"Great job, Sitri. Does it look like they'll rescind your demotion?" I asked.

More than three years had passed since Sitri had been blamed for a crime she didn't commit. Her level had been lowered to the negatives, and she'd been stuck with the terrible moniker "Ignoble." Naturally, I'd tried to protect her from that with everything I'd had, but it'd been no use. There'd been too much pressure from the empire, and I'd been neither strong nor connected enough to do anything about it at the time. To this day, it still didn't sit right with me that she'd been punished without concrete proof. Sitri had been framed undoubtedly. Otherwise, there wouldn't even be a set of circumstantial evidence for them to justify blaming her. She'd just smiled and forgiven me for failing so pathetically to protect her. Even now, I regarded this as my greatest failure since moving to the capital.

Her sister, meanwhile, had guffawed to her heart's content upon hearing the news of Sitri's demotion.

From what I'd been told, Sitri's incredible contributions to this recent case could lead to the repeal of her demotion. Gark would be on her side completely too.

My hope was dashed though when she wore a gentle smile and

shook her head.

Sigh, so it was no good...

"Since it's been a few years, they said," explained Sitri. "But I'm seldom addressed by my moniker now, so it should be taken off in a couple of years anyway."

"Hmm...bureaucracy at its finest this is."

"Their loss of recent memory worked against me. They suspected me of foul play."

"What? That's not your fault," I reassured her. "Besides, Talia lost her memory too, didn't she?"

Talia was a clanmate and friend of Sitri's. She'd found Talia detained in the Akashic Tower hideout. They'd been investigating why Noctus's team had abducted her, but since the culprits had lost their memory, I doubted the truth would ever come out. We'd just have to count our blessings that Sitri had been able to rescue Talia unharmed.

"Things would've been different if, say, evidence linking Akashic Tower to the prison breakout were to be found... But that'd be too convenient, wouldn't it?" she said.

"Right... Life doesn't always work out like that."

"Since I was the first to set foot in their hideout, it was premature to expect too much this time."

"Yeah, uh-huh?"

"Am I the only one who feels like you two are not always on the same page?" interjected Eva.

If we weren't, that was entirely on me. Sitri was so wickedly smart that I often couldn't keep up with what she was saying. And that was my go-to response, whether or not I could understand or even hear what someone was saying. Once, I'd spoken with Sitri, asking her what she'd meant every time I didn't understand her. That conversation had been so tedious that I'd decided to let slide any confusion or curiosity about Sitri's topics of conversation. My method had worked so far, so I saw no need to change it.

Reading the room, Eva excused herself. Apparently she respected the precious little time I could spend hanging out with my party mates nowadays.

Sitri faced me square. "Krai, thank you so much—for everything," she said.

"I'm the one who owes you thanks," I said a little guiltily.

Sitri had just gotten back to the capital when I'd roped her into this... And now *she* was thanking *me*? What an unfeeling beast I was! I relied too heavily on Sitri and her ever-gentle smile.

"No...this went so much better than last time!" she exclaimed without a hint of stress in her voice. "I can really tell how much I've grown." Her expression seemed brighter than usual too.

“You did a good job then?” I asked.

“Yes! Since I rescued Talia in the process, there’s nothing to complain about.”

Sitri was beaming; her gleaming pink eyes matched Liz’s. Seeing her like this reminded me that she and Liz were actually sisters.

“Except...” she said, “I’d needed to produce a culprit, so I’d decided to hold off on acquiring magical ingredients.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

Smiles made the world go round. Being a hunter wasn’t easy: there were plenty of hardships that made you want to just end it all or barf all over the place. Still, I really wanted Sitri to keep smiling through it all. To that end, I’d do anything I could...until I retire from treasure hunting.

“Speaking of it, did you settle whatever *history* you were talking about?” I asked.

Putting her hands together, Sitri said with a smile, “Yes. Thanks to colored water!”



Interlude: Dragon Slayer

He was a towering man with muscles threatening to burst through his gray half plate armor. Gleaming on his armor were countless scratches that told stories of the battles he'd survived. More noticeable than his stature, however, was the enormous sword on his back: an unsheathed bare-bones greatsword with a dull, golden blade.

Plenty of hunters walked the streets of the capital, but he drew the full attention of the crowd as he entered the city through the north (largest) gate. The man groaned at the attention gathered on him.

“So this is the famous Zebrudia.”

“Yes, Arnold. There's a lot of life here...like we've heard.”

Arnold had seven companions in tow. One of them, a man dressed in relatively light gear, took in their surroundings.

Everything about this place was different from Arnold's world. The number of people, the size of the city, the never-ending hustle and bustle, and—most remarkably—the air were different. Unlike in Nebulanubes, where they were hard-pressed to see the sun on any given day, the sky above Zebrudia was clear and blue. This was no land of perpetual fog where the people were depressed and on edge.

After giving their surroundings a good look like he was assessing a glimmering treasure, the man's grin widened.

“Of course... I don't see anyone too high in level. Even the famous Rodin may prove to be a disappointment. Hopefully we can have a little fun with him after coming all this way.”

The other men chimed in with laughter. Their eyes were bright with great confidence cultivated from vanquishing countless monsters in a world of dark fog, from training and honing their skills alongside each other, and, more than anything, from Arnold earning the title of “Hero” by saving an entire nation.

The broad, golden blade on his back was the insignia of one who'd slain a dragon, the apex being of this world. Arnold, the Crashing Lightning, the hero of the misty lands of Nebulanubes, and the leader of Falling Fog was not smiling.

With only a glance around the streets, he commanded, “Find the strongest warrior in this country.”

His golden eyes glimmered with an electrifying urge to fight.

To be continued in Part Three...

Side Story: Sitri's Growth Journal

Sitri Smart had cried a lot. She'd been so timid compared to her sister, Liz, that I sometimes couldn't believe they'd been related. Back in the day, she'd come crying to me at the drop of a hat. Her brother, Ansem, had been quiet and stoic, and her sister had been...well, *Liz*, so the responsibility had fallen upon me, the party leader, to lend her a shoulder.

On another note, I'd known nothing. Well, I'd had basic knowledge and vocabulary about treasure hunting, but those had still been insufficiently specialized for me to comprehend most of what Sitri had been saying. Still, I'd been an effective listener for Sitri because she hadn't been looking for practical advice or even more knowledge. She'd been dedicated, hardworking, and unmistakably talented (I may be biased); the only thing she'd lacked had been *confidence*.

I'd assumed that watching the others grow stronger and stronger had rattled her. Sitri had been plenty strong in my book already, but she'd always held a low opinion of and maintained very high standards for herself. Since Alchemists needed to be skilled in many departments, Sitri had always made herself the most studious of all of us. The only thing I could do had been giving her pretty useless advice confidently. It'd been exactly her own hard work that had made her the ever-smiling, best-studied Alchemist I'd known.

This...was a record of Sitri's growth throughout the years, written by her useless advisor:

Sitri, fifteen at the time, had come to me with tears in her eyes.

"I want to be useful too..."

"You already are," I'd said.

Grieving Souls had one of the best attack and defensive capabilities of any party I'd seen, and Sitri was the backbone of our operations. She handled everything including replenishing our supplies, researching information on vaults and phantoms, and even negotiating if it came to it. Even though she wasn't the best fighter in our party, we *couldn't* operate without her. She was so useful that there was practically *nothing* left for me to do. Most of the time, I just stood by Sitri and watched, not bothering to perform the duties of a

party leader.

I meant what I'd said, but Sitri shook her head.

"Not when in battles! I...want to join our fights! I can't stand just giving directions from afar!" she said as she buried her face in my chest.

"Yeah...uh-huh."

I patted her head to calm her down.

But that isn't the job of an Alchemist, is it? I thought.

She'd already contributed infinitely more than I had to the party, and she still wanted to do more. Besides, our battles were always intense, so I thought she might be better off pursuing a supporting role rather than becoming yet another attacker. We were too bloodthirsty then.

For the first time in a while, I seriously contemplated her conundrum.

"Well...then why don't you try throwing potions or something?"

At the time, Sitri's role in battle was to give direction, as well as to support and heal the other members before and after combat. Combat was too intense for her to directly intervene, but if she could at least heal the other members midcombat, that would make a huge difference for our party.

Sitri looked up at me and crooked her neck. She said, "You mean...I should brew poison to throw at our enemies?"

"What?! W-Well, I'm sure you're good at brewing poison, but—" *Why is she so hell-bent on killing things?*

"But most existing poisons are useless against monsters and phantoms—"

"Aren't those illegal anyway?" I pointed out.

"I'm licensed to handle them, of course—oh, I see..."

Since when has she obtained that license?

With utmost sincerity, Sitri said, "I just need to concoct a brand-new poison: something that could kill phantoms and monsters with just a single drop."

"What?!"

"Now that you've mentioned it, I've been too focused on healing and supporting—but with my aim, the poison may hit Liz or Luke—"

"W-W-W-W-Wait just a second!" I blurted out, taken aback by her confusion.

My intentions had been completely twisted in translation! And so, with a deep breath, I attempted to talk some sense into her.

"You know...you can rely on your friends some more, Sitri." *Just leave the attacking to Luke and Liz*, I thought. *After all, that's all they've cared to learn.*

Sitri clapped her hands as if in revelation; her tears had already

dried.

"I understand..." she'd said. "I just need to help them build immunity, so they won't be affected by the poison even if it hits them... That'd help them survive other poisons too. What a revolutionary idea! What have I been so worried about? I have so much research to do! Thank you, Krai!"

With that, Sitri had beamed at me and stormed off before I could get a word in edgewise.

Sitri, sixteen at the time, had come to me with her lips tightly pursed and tears welling in her eyes.

"Krai, I can't do this anymore... I'm useless..."

"Come here. Deep breaths, deep breaths," I'd begun to console her.

Sitri had leaped into my arms.

Nowadays, her physical growth in the breast department was getting really noticeable when she held me like this. This was a bit awkward for me, feeling those soft peaks through her thick robe—not that I was paying them any mind in Sitri's time of need.

"The enemies we've been facing are too nimble for me to hit them with my poison!" she said while sobbing.

"Yeah, uh-huh..."

Sitri's poison-throwing tactic had proven deadly. With just a drop, her poison melted away monsters—even those with impenetrable exoskeletons. In some vaults, she'd kill more enemies than even Luke or Liz. That, of course, had stoked a flame in their hearts. For a while, Sitri, Liz, and Luke had competed to see who could kill the most monsters and phantoms during our quests.

Her voice quivering, Sitri pushed her body against mine.

"What should I do...? At this rate, you'll expel me from the party."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen." *But you're an Alchemist—you're supposed to be the backup.*

Sitri had somehow gotten herself into the front line, much to my terror. Watching her jump into action hadn't been good for my blood pressure. Chucking vial after vial of poison didn't seem quite right for her.

"Why don't you take a moment to ponder the essence of an Alchemist's role? I'm sure you're tired of throwing poison vials around too."

"The essence of an Alchemist's role..." she repeated.

As she said, she put her ear against my chest as if to listen for my heartbeat. I'd say the same for Liz, but there was something off about the Smart girls: they acted like they didn't consider me as a guy.

“When you put it that way...maybe as an Alchemist, I should contribute magical creatures rather than poison,” she said.

“Huh...? Yeah, uh-huh.” Who was I to disagree? Her new pursuit would work out better for me at least.

Creating magical creatures, along with concocting poisons and potions, was a craft reserved for Alchemists: they created artificial life-forms like homunculi, golems, slimes, and more. There weren’t too many Alchemist hunters in history for Sitri to take inspiration from, but I heard that even Alchemists who worked in labs kept a golem or two as bodyguards. Pursuing this path surely had to be better than chucking incredibly lethal vials of poison at our enemies.

“But, Krai, I’ve done my research on this: slimes, homunculi, golems, chimeras...they’re all too frail, at least for the hunts we go on.”

“Well...”

“Chimeras are the most durable of them all, but building a strong one requires the corpses of powerful monsters. For how difficult it’d be to obtain the ingredients, it won’t be very... The wrong combination will lead to immunodeficiency... Considering the growth potential...” Sitri rambled on, teary-eyed.

While I didn’t understand most of what she was saying, it sounded like she had put a lot of thought and effort into that already. Like she’d said, I supposed there were hardly any magical creatures that could keep up with high-level hunters. If making magical creatures of such caliber had been easy, all the Alchemists would’ve been taking on side gigs as hunters.

“Yeah, uh-huh. Hunters are just about the only people who can make it through high-level vaults anyway,” I said.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed better for Sitri to stick to a support role. Harsher battles would mean a greater need for support anyway.

Sitri looked at me with her eyes reddened from crying. “Hunters are just about the only people who can make it through high-level vaults...” she parroted. “Yes! I just need hunters!”

“Huh?”

Sitri was now mumbling to herself incoherently in my arms. In this state, even my words wouldn’t be able to reach her. Times like this reminded me that she really was Liz’s sister.

“Chimeras...a patchwork of the strongest parts... If they’re all humans, I won’t have to worry about necrosis...strengthen them with mana material... With humans, its mana material intake rate...”

“Yeah, uh-huh...” I said while combing her hair with my fingers as she continued.

“But how can I get my hands on them...? We can’t hunt down

other hunters...can we, Krai?"

"Uh, no... No, we can't." *How did that thought get into her?* "Crime is bad, Sitri, just to be clear. What goes around comes around, you know?"

Massacring monsters and phantoms daily seemed to have taken a toll on her moral compass. Helping my friends retain their humanity might very well have been one of the few things only I could do. Maybe *that* had been my purpose in life...

Sitri clapped her hands. "What goes around comes around... Crime... Criminal hunters... The great prison... You're right! There'll be plenty of ingredients there, plenty of talented hunters..." Sitri rambled on incoherently.

Sometimes, I wondered if she was just too smart for me to understand her words.

Suddenly, she turned her gaze to the ground and said, "But...do you really think I can do it?"

Her frail shoulders were trembling.

Whatever she was aspiring to do, her nervousness was threatening to make the better of her. With her talent and the skills she'd worked so hard to build, she could do anything.

All I could do was to encourage her. I held her tight and patted her back.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but you can do anything you set your mind to," I'd said.

After a few moments in my embrace, Sitri had stood strong again, her tears dried.

"You're right. I'll never know if I don't try. Thank you, Krai! I better start planning...!"

"Okey dokey, good luck."

Another job well done.

With a satisfied smile, I'd watched Sitri set off on her project.

"I messed up, Krai..."

Sitri had come to me completely downhearted.

Accused of aiding the breakout at the great prison, Sitri was in a serious predicament. Every bit of circumstantial evidence pointed to Sitri being involved. There was no smoking gun, but it seemed like we, the Griever, were the only ones who had faith in Sitri's innocence.

I'd used every connection I'd made since moving to the capital to try and defend Sitri, but I'd only achieved to cast a tiny shadow of a doubt to her guilt.

All the high-level hunters who'd broken out of the prison were

still at-large, and the Third Order was frantically searching for them and any physical evidence of the culprit.

Honestly, I'd never felt that powerless in my life.

"I'll accept the moniker; some blame lies with me too. It's no good if the culprit hasn't been apprehended. There are plenty of things I can learn from this. Next time...next time, I won't make such a mistake. I'll be better," Sitri said.

She remained strong. Even in the face of great dishonor and the worst punishment a hunter could ever receive, she didn't change. Tears no longer filled her eyes, which glimmered with determination instead.

A full-fledged Alchemist stood before me.

"But I did get my hands on some wonderful ingredients. So it all worked out in the end."

Whatever ingredients she'd been talking about, I was happy that she was focusing on the future.

Sitri had smiled and said, "It's all thanks to you, Krai. Thank you so, so much!"

Sitri, seventeen at the time, had come to me cheerful and blushing.

"Look, Krai! I've finally managed to put them together. It's still a work in progress, but I really wanted to show you, so...here it is."

Standing over two meters tall, the thing was like a gray boulder. Its humanoid frame was bulging inhumanly with muscles. Only a banana hammock and a paper bag mask covered its anatomy, the bag contracting and expanding with its heavy breathing.

The shock of coming face-to-face (or face-to-bag) with that creature was almost enough to make me barf. I'd seen plenty of unhinged hunters over the years but nothing as off-the-wall as *that*. If Sitri had told me that this thing towering above me was a potential new member of Grieving Souls, I would've retired on the spot.

"It's wonderful! At this rate, it can continue to adapt to higher-level treasure vaults. Organic is the way to go! I did waste a lot of the ingredients though... Anyway, its name is Killiam!" she explained.

In response, Killiam shrieked, "Kill..."

"Uh-huh...?" I said, completely disgusted. I'd never seen any creature like this before. "What is it?"

"Um...a magical creature," Sitri said.

"A *magical creature*?!"

I would've been less surprised if she'd told me the thing was a bona fide demon.

With Killiam's shoulders rising and falling in the background, Sitri

smiled at me and said, “Yes, a magical creature—my magnum opus! Considering the ingredients used, I already know it can absorb mana material at a remarkable rate. The more vaults I take it to, the stronger it will become!”

Killiam already looked *too* strong for my taste... What was more disconcerting though, was the fact that she planned to take the thing around like a pet...

What does this have to do with alchemy whatsoever? I thought. *What kind of magical creature is it anyway?! This is complete madness!*

Shining through the holes in the paper bag were Killiam’s eyes—I wanted to barf!

Sitri, her eyes lowered, timidly suggested, “This has really helped me on becoming more confident. So I’ve been thinking of furthering my research on some other magical creatures. I’d stopped myself from conducting such research before... I don’t know if I’ll succeed with it, but—”

Masking my disgust flawlessly, I calmly advised her, “Sitri, why don’t you go do some research with other Alchemists in a lab outside the clan? I’m sure that will be better than taking this on alone.”

“What...?”

And have them remind you what’s right and what’s wrong, I’d thought.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up the second volume of my humble story! Tsukikage the author here.

Just like in volume one, I've packed in everything I wanted to write about. With all that wonderful content, there's not too much left for me to discuss in this afterword. But there's one thing I can tell: this book is mostly about Sitri Smart, who has made her appearance at the end of volume one. She's the girl who looks like a damsel in distress on the cover.

When I first saw that cover, I was shaken. For a story driven by misunderstandings, I couldn't have asked for more. I won't mention any more about Sitri in case you haven't read the volume yet.

Our story takes place after Krai and the Grievors have garnered fame over several years as treasure hunters. Naturally they had many adventures, and the characters had grown over the years leading up to the start of volume one.

When first conceptualizing these characters, I'd marked Sitri as a "timid girl." This is true, and she shared Krai's sensibilities—at least at the beginning of the Grievors' careers. This is something I'd like to explore in the future. If I can't fit it into the main series, I'll find another way to tell her story.

I want to announce that the manga adaptation for this series is officially in the works! A story that I'd started out writing alone is now published through the help of my editors and illustrator—and now, with the help of an artist, it'll become a manga. I'm half proud, half embarrassed almost—that's a lot of emotions! Please look forward to reading about Krai and the Grievors in this new medium.

Finally, I'd like to wrap this up with thanks...to Chyko, the illustrator who has met my crazy demands for a giant golem, a bodybuilder in a banana hammock, as well as the usual cutesy girls. Thanks to mana material, I can put pretty much anything in this world, new or old... Sorry in advance.

And thanks to Kawaguchi, my editor, as well as everyone involved with the publishing at GC Novels and other corporations involved. My only note was "great" after the editing pass—not because I was lazy but because Kawaguchi had done such a perfect job. I look forward to

working with you on the next volume.

And most of all, thanks to all the readers who have followed this story from its web debut all the way until now.

Tsukikage, December 2018



Let This Grieving Soul Retire!



Woe is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party

2

Tsukikage^{Story}



Art
Chyko



"Don't
you dare, Liz!
Why did you
come anyway?!"

Sitri Smart

Liz Smart

"I'm gonna
tattle on you, Siddy.
I'm gonna let Kral Baby
know you're having
a tough time. And
you owe me one."

"You're a Thief!
Let us have some
fun once in
a while!"

Sven Anger

"RRAAAAAGH!"

Ark Welter



Krai Andrey

Eva Renfied

"Phantoms are specks of dust before
you, Master! I'll go if you go!"

Everyone seemed confident about this
quest all of a sudden.

How could they be so reckless as to
trust me with their lives?

Eva was giving me her icy look again;
I guess she was telling me to do my
job for once. This was cruel and
inhumane though.

I was going to barf.

Tino Shade







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Strongest Party Volume 2
by Tsukikage

Translated by Adam Seacord
Edited by Stephanie Buck

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